SHORT STORIES

No. 784.] Week ending January 9, 1904. [Price One Penny.

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(A Striking Incident from the Story, "JUST IN TIME." See inside.)

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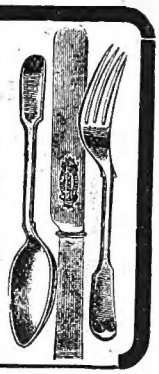

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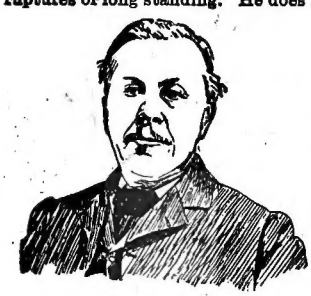

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Short Stories

No. 784.] [One Penny.

For the Week Ending January 9th, 1904.

JUST IN TIME.

Telling How a Fortune-Teller Saved Her Lover From Death.

Containing the incident depicted on the cover.

"You can't do better than have Laurence Wilding for the mural paintings."

Lady Blanche Hargreaves spoke with her usual decision, and looked so convinced of her own infallibility that it required some strength of mind to differ from her. She was a pretty little widow of eight or nine-and-twenty, whose soft, wildflower face concealed an iron will.

"He did you very well, certainly," replied her visitor thoughtfully. "I know you recommend him everywhere."

"I've taken him up," proclaimed Lady Blanche. "He's doing Lord Warner's house now, and making a grand success of it. You try him, Florence, or, rather, get your husband to try him."

Lady Blanche had rather a contempt for women hampered with husbands, and seemed to regard her own early widowhood as a proof of sagacity.

"I think I can manage it," returned Mrs. Deering. "There is another thing I wanted to ask you, Blanche. I want some special attraction for my garden-party next month. Can you suggest anything?"

"Have Stella. She's coming to the front as a fortune-teller of the old-fashioned sort. She isn't a crystal-gazer or a palmist or medium, she just "lays the cards" as the gipsies call it. She's very clever, really. My maid, Parry, first told me of her. It seems she had been to her and had heard of wonderful things. I sent for Stella and she really told me some most extraordinary truths."

"That she had heard from Parry," interpolated the sceptical Mrs. Deering.

"No, indeed, things Parry knew nothing about. So I've taken Stella up, and I've introduced her to lots of people and got her heaps of engagements. You'll try her, won't you, Florrie?"

"Let me have her proper name and address later on, and I'll write to her. But I want to know more about Laurence Wilding. How did you pick him up?"

Lady Blanche blushed a sudden vivid scarlet.

"I heard of him as a clever artist," she replied somewhat evasively, "and I wrote to him about the mural paintings for my dining-room. He was so successful that I recommended him everywhere, and now he is very well known."

"Yes, I've heard him called 'Lady Blanche Hargreaves' tame artist,'" observed Mrs. Deering drily. "Isn't he awfully handsome?"

The door was thrown open at this moment with the announcement: "Mr. Wilding"—and a young man, not so much handsome as distinguished in appearance, advanced eagerly to greet Lady Blanche.

"We were talking of Stella, the fortune-teller," observed Lady Blanche, after greetings and introductions were over. "Mrs. Deering thinks of engaging her for her garden-party."

"Have you, too, consulted Stella, Mr. Wilding?" laughed Mrs. Deering.

The young man shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'm a thorough sceptic in those matters," he replied.

"Yes, you won't even investigate," cried Lady Blanche. "Now, why won't you go and interview Stella and test her for yourself? Then you could let Mrs. Deering know if you thought she ought to try Stella at her entertainment or not."

"Oh, do, Mr. Wilding," chimed in Mrs. Deering. "I could so rely on your report. Dear Lady Blanche is perhaps rather easily carried away in such matters, but a keen, cool unbeliever like yourself is not to be deluded. Do promise me to go at once and let me have a full, true, and particular account."

"You can't go at once," said Lady Blanche. "You must first write and make an appointment. She has a room in Tottenham Court Road, where she meets people, and where her letters are sent, but she doesn't live there."

"You will write at once and make an appointment, won't you?" cried Mrs. Deering impulsively.

Laurence promised, and the conversation drifted into other channels. Now that Mrs. Deering had seen the young artist, she was anxious to secure his services for the decoration of her drawing-room, but Laurence was unable to undertake any more commissions for some time to come. He was not dependent on his art for a livelihood, as he possessed a very comfortable fortune of his own; therefore the fact that he was rapidly becoming the fashion, and could command what prices he liked for his work, was of less importance to him than it would have been to many men. He looked a thoroughly happy, contented, prosperous young fellow, as, having secured an

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appointment with Stella, he strode along to the fateful interview with the fortune-teller.

He was in excellent spirits. Everything was going well with him, and his prospects were rosy. He was not in love with Lady Blanche Hargreaves, but he admired her very much, and he felt that he could make her an excellent husband. Without being a coxcomb, he could not help seeing that she was very fond of him, and if he chose to ask her to marry him, there would be no difficulties.

She was a widow and absolutely her own mistress; he had no near relations to interfere. Her fortune was not a temptation to him, for his own means were ample, but he was an ardent lover of beauty, and Lady Blanche was exquisitely pretty, with her fair curls and blush-rose face, lit up by velvety brown eyes.

He had no belief or even interest in any method of foretelling the future, and there was a very supercilious smile on his lips as he entered the bare little room where the sorceress awaited him.

He was going through this farce to oblige Lady Blanche and her friend, and he cared little how obvious was his disdain of the folly.

A tall, slender woman came forward at his entrance. She was robed in a black silk garment, which fell in graceful folds from her throat to her feet. Her face was almost startling in its beauty and the weird intensity of expression.

She hardly noticed his greeting and explanatory remark, and making no response beyond a slight inclination of her head, moved behind a small table strewn with cards, which she took up and shuffled.

"The usual business," thought Laurence scornfully, as he watched the cards slip through the slim, white fingers. "Now for the inevitable 'a fair lady loves you,' 'You will receive a legacy,' and all the rest of the humbug."

"The cards foretell your death is imminent," said Stella suddenly, in her full, musical, but slightly trembling tones.

"What! My death?" exclaimed Laurence, startled against his will. Then recovering himself, he added smiling: "That is rather unnerving. Tell me some details, please. My death is imminent, you say; from an accident, perhaps? No?" as she shook her head. "Sudden illness, then? Not that either? Violence?" She made a sign in the affirmative. "This grows interesting. Who seeks my death?"

"Your enemy."

"Don't believe I've an enemy in the world," observed Laurence brusquely. "You are mistaken there."

"I am not mistaken," she said, still looking at the cards, as they fell from her hands to the table. "You have an enemy—a man—whom you have baulked in some wish of his three times. He has vowed vengeance. He will have your life, and that shortly."

"How melodramatic! I'm afraid you are on the wrong track, Miss Stella. I can't follow you a bit."

"This man is young, very handsome in a dark Italian style, with—let me see—yes, with a scar on his left cheek. Do you know such a man?"

"By Jove, yes," answered Laurence, interested in spite of himself. "I should say I do. But he's not my enemy; the man I mean, the man with the scar on his cheek is my best friend."

"You have been his successful rival twice in a competition of some kind—painting I should think."

"Well, that's true, but he wasn't unpleasant about it. No one congratulated me more heartily than he did."

"And now you are his rival again, and this time there is a lady in the case. She is very fair and pretty, and he loves beauty; rich, too, and he wants money; she has position and influence, and he would like to be a power in Society. She prefers you, but if you were out of the way, she would, he thinks, turn to him again, for she liked him first. He introduced you to her, and he thinks——"

"Thinks I cut him out," broke in Laurence, laughing. "There is more than witchcraft in this, Miss Stella. You didn't get all that out of the cards, you know. Now, who posted you in my affairs? Tell me honestly?"

"I tell you what the cards tell me," she persisted. "Am I to warn you that you are in serious danger?"

"From good old Pinto? He isn't Italian, by the way, but of Spanish blood, though born and brought up in England. I simply can't believe that he is my enemy or that there is any truth whatever in anything that the cards have told you."

Stella sighed heavily.

"I have done my best," she murmured. "I made this appointment with you that I might get a chance to warn you. I thought perhaps you would believe me."

Laurence had been looking at her steadily for some minutes.

"I thought I had seen you before," he said, "and now I know where it was. It was not you but your portrait. You sat for the girl in that last picture of Pinto's, 'Rest at Eventide,' did you not?"

"Yes, he is a distant relative of mine, and I have acted as his model several times."

Laurence could not have told the reason, but his heart suddenly melted towards this girl with the pale, beautiful face and the pathetic, dark eyes. Something in her appealed to him more strongly than ever Lady Blanche's gay, triumphant beauty had done. He altered his tone.

"I'm sure you really mean kindly towards me," he said. "I suppose you heard Pinto make some nasty remarks about my luck, and, being sensitive and imaginative, you have jumped to the conclusion that he meant to murder me. Rather far-fetched, perhaps, but you are evidently highly strung and nervous. It is good of you to take so much interest in the fate of a complete stranger."

"A complete stranger," she repeated, and for the first time a faint smile parted her lovely lips. "Do you remember the name of Marsden?"

"Marsden? Why, of course I do; my dear old tutor. Can you possibly be—— You must be little Essie Marsden. No wonder I seemed to know your face," and Laurence seized her hand and shook it heartily.

"Yes, I am Esther Marsden, who used to ride on your shoulder, years ago when you were a boy reading with her father, and she was a tiny baby-girl."

"But how is your father? I fancied—— Did I not hear——" Laurence hesitated and stopped.

"Yes, he is dead. He died three years ago, leaving my mother and me almost penniless. She is in such delicate health that I could not leave her to take a situation of any kind, and so I have had to make money as best I could. I have sat as model to Mr. Pinto, taken in art needlework, gone out by the day to do mending, and given lessons on the piano at a shilling an hour. I used often to 'lay the cards' for the amusement of my girl-friends, so one day I thought of doing it for At Homes, bazaars, and so on. I was very successful, and then Lady Blanche Hargreaves was interested in me, and since then I have done very well."

"Poor little Essie," was all Laurence could say, as his thoughts went back to the days of his boyhood, when his tutor's little daughter had been such a cherished household pet, and his own little plaything. How bravely the girl was fighting the battle of life, handicapped as she was by the helpless, invalid mother.

"You will not forget my warning," said Esther, after a pause. "Indeed, *indeed* I have a reason for what I say. Mr.

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Pinto hates you. He thinks Lady Blanche Hargreaves would have accepted him if it had not been for you, and since he has heard of your engagement to her he has been like a madman."

"I am not engaged to Lady Blanche Hargreaves," said Laurence, almost sternly, "nor have I any intention of asking her to be my wife. At the same time, Essie—I may call you Essie, may I not?—I will accept your warning so far that I will be on my guard against Pinto. Not that I believe he would really attempt my life; still, I will be on my guard. Now, dear Essie, I will go, but you will permit me to see you again, won't you? I want to call and see your mother."

Esther hesitated; but knowing the pleasure it would give her mother to see one of the friends of her prosperous days again, she gave the required permission, and, noting the address in his pocket-book, Laurence withdrew.

* * * * * * *

Lady Blanche Hargreaves was in a state of thorough dissatisfaction. The world was decidedly out of joint, and she did not see her way clear to setting it right. Her "tame artist" had deserted her. For weeks she had seen nothing of him, and her friends were beginning to ask questions which she found very disagreeable.

"Stella," too, had turned out most unsatisfactory. The young fortune-teller had refused to attend Mrs. Deering's garden party, and had also declined several other offers of engagements which her would-be patroness had obtained for her, explaining in a brief but courteous note that she no longer attended entertainments or received clients.

"Stella" had, in short, retired into private life, and, angry as that fact made Lady Blanche, she would have been much more wrathful had she had the slightest idea that the unaccountable behaviour of both the recalcitrants was indirectly caused by herself. Had she not joined Mrs. Deering in urging Laurence to consult "Stella," the young artist would never have met his old tutor's daughter again and fallen in love with her.

For Laurence loved Esther with a real, true love, such as he had never felt for Blanche.

He had called on Mrs. Marsden in her dreary lodgings, and been cordially received, for he had been a great favourite in his tutor's household, and the poor invalid was glad to see a friendly face from the happy past.

She confided her troubles to him, and Laurence, who was, though an artist, a keen business man, at once suspected dishonesty on the part of her lawyer. Mrs. Marsden gave him her authority to investigate matters, and he soon found out that she was being cheated by the man who had her small affairs in charge.

Laurence acted with vigour and wisdom, and managed to secure to the widow a yearly income, which, if small, was sufficient to live on in modest comfort.

Thus Esther was enabled to give up her uncongenial work, and devote herself to nursing her mother.

While Laurence was arranging the widow's money matters it was of course necessary, or he thought so, that he should call every day, and every visit deepened his love for Esther.

His heart had never been touched by Blanche. He had admired her, and perhaps his vanity had been flattered by her evident liking for him; but as he contrasted her gay flippancy, her caprice, her petulance, her shallowness, with the noble devotion, the uncomplaining fortitude, the deep feeling shown by Esther, he realised the difference between a true woman and an irresponsible trifler, and knew that what he felt for Esther was indeed love.

Blanche had no way of placing herself again in touch with Laurence except by writing to him, which she was reluctant to do, so she was very gracious to Pinto when he called one afternoon. She knew he was an intimate friend of Laurence Wilding, for it was at one of his studio teas that she had first met Laurence.

Cautiously she introduced his name. Pinto had seen little of his friend lately, he returned carelessly.

"I fancy there is a lady in the case," he added, smiling, and Blanche flushed scarlet. She had never thought of a rival. Eagerly she plied Pinto with questions, which he dexterously parried, contriving to leave her with the impression that he knew very much more than he chose to tell.

"Are you likely to see Mr. Wilding soon?" she asked, as her guest was taking leave.

"I'm going to his studio now," replied Pinto. "Can I give him any message from you?"

Blanche had come to a sudden decision. The idea of a rival was insupportable to her. She must make an effort to win Laurence back.

"Please give him a note from me," she said, and hastily pencilled an urgent request to Laurence to meet her at his studio at five o'clock on the following day.

* * * *

"Shall you be very much disappointed if we put off going to see those pictures till next week, Essie?" asked Laurence anxiously. "To-morrow is my only free day this week, and I have just had a note from Lady Blanche Hargreaves, telling me she will call at my studio to-morrow at three o'clock on urgent business. I think I ought to make a point of being there, for she has been very kind to me, and I have not seen her for five or six weeks now."

"Oh, certainly you must go. Perhaps she wants you to paint something for her."

"Yes, I had better be there. Curious thing. She says 'Mr. Pinto will give you this note,' but it was delivered by a messenger boy. I haven't seen Pinto for quite two months."

"Mr. Pinto," repeated Esther, in a startled tone. "That is curious. What can it mean?"

"I suppose Pinto was calling on Lady Blanche, and perhaps was going to the club, where he thought he'd see me, so offered to take a message. When he didn't see me, he sent the note on by messenger."

"But why should he offer to take a message? Why did Lady Blanche intrust the note to him? It seems very odd to me."

"Lady Blanche is odd, that's all," observed Laurence lightly. "But I don't suppose my interview with her will last very long. An hour or so will be enough to discuss any business she may have to talk about. We might manage the pictures after all, Essie, if you would be at my studio at about four o'clock. I'll have tea ready for you both. My old Mary can get up the jolliest little teas, I assure you. Do come, won't you?"

"Yes, do go, dear Essie," broke in Mrs. Marsden from her couch. "I know how much you have been looking forward to those pictures, and I should be sorry for you to miss the pleasure. She will go, Laurence," she added to the young man, and Esther's lovely, smiling face gave no contradiction.

* * * * * *

Laurence Wilding's studio was picturesque in the extreme. All that money and good taste could do had been done, and a more perfectly beautiful place could not be imagined.

It was three o'clock, and Laurence stood awaiting his

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fair guest. He was very much annoyed, for his old caretaker was not to be found, and the dainty little tea which he had intended to have provided was out of the question.

Also there was no one to open the door, so that when presently Laurence heard a knock, he hastened to attend to it himself.

"Hallo, Pinto!" he exclaimed, as he saw the visitor. "Come in, old man. Why, I haven't seen you for ages."

Pinto walked silently into the studio, and looked round.

"You are alone," he said tonelessly.

"Yes, but I'm expecting someone on business shortly."

"You're expecting Lady Blanche Hargreaves," said Pinto, suddenly facing round, and there was something so strange in his look and manner that Laurence involuntarily thought of Esther's warning.

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"You are expecting Lady Blanche," snarled Pinto again. "She wrote to you that she would be here at five o'clock, but I altered the hour to three before I sent the note on to you."

"How dare you meddle with my letters? And what do you mean by your extraordinary behaviour now?" cried Laurence. "You must have been drinking, man."

With the bound of a tiger Pinto sprang upon him, and bore him to the ground. Laurence was the slighter and smaller man, and was completely taken by surprise, so his resistance was futile. Pinto held him firmly down, and Laurence saw something gleaming in his hand. He raised his voice with a wild shout for help.

"There isn't a soul in the building," observed Pinto, grimly. "I saw to that. At five o'clock Blanche will come here, but she will find you dead. It will be suicide, the doctors will say, for I shall arrange that. I shall console the beautiful Blanche, and she will be mine once you are out of the way."

Laurence felt a sudden shock, a pain as if a red-hot knife were plunged into his breast, and all was dark.

"Dead," muttered Pinto to himself. He rose, and opening the door of a large closet half full of lumber, he thrust the body within, placing the stiletto with which he had done the deed in the nerveless hand. Then softly and quietly as he had come he slipped from the room.

* * * * * *

"I can't make anyone hear."

Esther turned round as she heard a step behind her, and found herself face to face with Lady Blanche Hargreaves.

"Stella. *You!*" exclaimed Blanche in amazement. "What are you doing here? This is Mr. Wilding's studio."

Esther explained and Blanche listened, her face flaming with anger. This, instinct told her, was the rival Pinto had hinted at, and, she feared, a successful one.

"We had better go in," she said coldly. "Mr. Wilding's servant must be out. The door is not locked."

Pushing the door open, she swept in, Esther following with a vague anxiety in her heart.

The room was vacant. Esther took a seat near the window, and looked timidly around. Blanche amused herself by closely examining everything in the room. It was a long time before she broke the silence.

"Very odd he should be out," she remarked at last. "I said I should be here at five o'clock, and it is now nearly six."

"Didn't you appoint three o'clock?" asked Esther. Blanche shot a fiery glance at her.

"No; five. And Mr. Pinto undertook to give him the note at once. I don't understand this."

Esther shivered as she heard the name of Pinto, and the uneasiness increased.

"I shall wait no longer," proclaimed Blanche, at the end of another quarter of an hour. "You may do as you like, but I shall go," and she swept to the door.

But before she had time to turn the handle, a low, thrilling cry arrested her. She turned, and saw Esther standing frozen with horror, pointing to a door, from under which crept a dark, sluggish stream.

"What is that?" gasped Esther. "*What* is it? Merciful Heavens, it's blood, it's blood!"

With a cry that echoed through the whole building Blanche sprang to the closet and tore open the door. There, senseless and bleeding, lay Laurence Wilding.

"Oh, my darling, my darling, he has murdered you after all," wailed Esther, pressing the cold hand to her lips.

Blanche made one bound to the door, and fled shrieking down the staircase.

In a few seconds, as it seemed, the room was filled with people, and a doctor made his way to the side of the victim.

A moment's breathless suspense, and then:

"He lives, and his wound, though serious, is not necessarily fatal," he said.

Blanche had returned, and was waiting anxiously for the doctor's report.

"Thank Heaven!" she breathed softly, and then she stretched out her hands to Esther.

"He is saved for you, Stella; I feel it. You love him and he loves you. May you be happy."

For the wilful, capricious Blanche had a heart after all.

* * * * * *

"My darling, you are looking better."

Very tenderly Esther said it, for her husband of a few weeks was exceedingly precious to her, and had hardly yet recovered from his dangerous wound.

They were spending their honeymoon in the south of France, and every day seemed to bring fresh life and vigour to Laurence.

He looked up with a beaming smile to greet his young wife.

"I'm as fit as possible, dearest. What have you there? Letters? Heard from the mater?"

"Yes, and she is so much better. Oh, Lauric, how happy I am. Here are some letters for you."

He read them silently through.

"There is news of Pinto," he said, suddenly looking down at her, as she sat on a cushion by his couch.

Esther shuddered.

"Oh, Laurie, that dreadful man."

"The police tracked him to a common lodging house, where he lay very ill with pneumonia. He must have learnt that I had been found alive, and have tried to conceal himself. He is dead, Elsie."

She breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"And there is some more news in this letter, darling. Blanche is going to marry a friend of mine, a right down good fellow, and writes me the nicest letter about it. Read it yourself, dear. She seems almost as happy as we are ourselves."

"But not quite, Laurie. Nobody could ever be *quite* as happy as I am with you."

Vera Serkoff.

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LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

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PROLOGUE.

A YOUTH is in the private room of Messrs. Samuel Sharpe and Quirke, solicitors, awaiting the head of the firm's announcement as to whether he is the heir to the baronetcy of the late Sir Basil Wingate or not.

Mr. Sharpe says:

"You will remember, Mr. Rust, at the reading of the will, the title, which by special remainder he had power to dispose of, and the money were left by Sir Basil Wingate to the elder son of his run-away only daughter, Helen Jerningham, *should* she have one; and failing a son being born to her, the title and the money *with* the estate, should go to you, his nephew; afterwards to *your* son—should you marry, or to the *son* of your daughter; no child of the feminine sex directly inheriting it."

He then tells Cyprian Rust that, hearing Helen Jerningham went to Australia, he has extensively advertised for her in Australian papers, but with no effect. Therefore he congratulates his listener on becoming Sir Cyprian Rust.

The solicitor is called out of the room, and Cyprian Rust sees on the table an unopened letter with an Australian stamp. The address he recognises as being in the handwriting of his cousin, Helen Jerningham!

Is it written to announce the birth of a son and heir? If so it would rob him of the legacy at the eleventh hour!

A step sounds outside the door. Quickly Cyprian Rust thrusts the letter into his pocket. He hurriedly says good-bye to Mr. Sharpe, and when he reaches his hotel he reads the missive. It tells how Helen Jerningham has left Australia, so that the future heir—if a boy—may be born in England!

Sir Cyprian Rust carefully burns the letter that might have dealt the death-blow to his ambitions, and mentally resolves to go to any extremes to retain the title.

Meanwhile Helen Jerningham is dying on board an ocean liner in giving birth to twin sons.

From incoherent remarks that she makes, the physician who attends her is led to believe that a secret is attached to the boys' history. But she dies ere she reveals her name or the boys' identity!

Many years later.

MARCELLA RUST, daughter of Sir Cyprian, finds a spade guinea which a mysterious man has hidden underneath the mat outside a certain room which she has been forbidden to enter in their home, Wingate Court, Crawley. Her curiosity is naturally aroused, and she tells her father of the occurrence. He seems annoyed at her alertness.

Sir Cyprian learns, through the Rev. Philip Nullius, that a dying woman wishes to see him.

He goes to see her, and she shows him a later will of Sir Basil Wingate, by which all his property is left to the descendant of Helen Jerningham unconditionally. Sir Cyprian snatches this will from her, and she dies before she can inform anyone else.

Sir Cyprian visits Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox, where he meets Mr. Caleb J. Johnson, millionaire and City magnate, who is in love with the hostess. The baronet, who has Lady Violet in his coils, forces her to swear to take particulars of the millionaire's house and property.

Late in the evening Johnson proposes to Lady Violet. Knowing her position, she, of course, refuses him. As she does so, the palms in front of the window part and a man lurches heavily into the room.

Lady Violet recognises him as her husband—a former Major in the Army, who has been separated from her for many years. Hastily she requests Johnson to leave; then, turning on her unwelcome visitor, she by threats prevails upon him to go.

In the corridor this Society ruffian encounters Sir Cyprian, and sees upon his watch-chain the Sign of the Spade.

Edward Day proposes to Marcella. Being refused, he angrily lets fall an allusion to Marcella's dead mother.

Lady Violet overhears this, and, with blazing eyes, dismisses Day, who acts as her secretary, from her service.

She makes him an allowance of £250 a year, and gives him a letter of introduction to the millionaire, Caleb J. Johnson.

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The latter discovers, through a private inquiry agent, the whole history of Major Richard Frayne-Lennox, and buys off a General Lyster the cheque that he had forged.

Edward Day makes a satisfactory visit to the financier, and afterwards visits his wife, Lottie, a chorus girl, of whom he has grown tired. He tells her of the rupture between himself and Lady Violet, who does not know that he is married.

At Wingate Court, Marcella reads of the theft of a valuable picture from Caleb Johnson's house. As she was one of the last persons to see the picture, which the millionaire prized very greatly, she evinces great interest in the accounts of the robbery.

Sir William Slade, of Harley Street fame, visits Sir Cyprian, and, as the day is very boisterous, is greatly concerned to hear that Marcella has set out for Danger Point, a very dangerous rock on the coast. His host, however, assures him that Marcella will be quite safe, as she knows the locality well.

As a matter of fact, she is only just rescued in time from a very perilous position.

FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

"Love's Young Dream."

WHEN Marcella opened her eyes she was on the beach beneath the shadow of the rock on whose grim surface she had so narrowly escaped death. For a time she knew nothing of what had passed; then recollection dawned, and, with a slight shudder, she looked up to see the face of the man she most hated, bending over her. It was Edward Day.

"You!" she gasped, in tones of undisguised disappointment, that made him shut his teeth with a metallic click. "How do you come here?"

"I am sorry," he said slowly, "if my presence annoys you, Miss Rust, but I happened to be staying a day or two in Crawley, and a very fortunate chance brought me out this way this afternoon. I am glad to have had the honour of being of some assistance to you, and to also apologise for having let my conduct be so utterly unworthy of the family to which I am proud to belong!"

This was a chance shot, as he was not sure whether Lady Violet had not also informed her niece that he had no right to the protection of her name. Apparently she had not, for Marcella hesitated, then said slowly:

"I am glad you apologise, Mr. Day, for it shows that you at least realise a little of the enormity of your conduct. But I will be only too pleased to try to forget our last interview, and attribute it to any cause than that it at first appeared to be. Had you no one with you?" she asked wistfully. "I thought I heard a voice call."

Before Edward Day could reply a shadow came forward.

"It was my voice you heard, Miss Rust. I seemed to know that there was someone in trouble on Danger Point, and having had some little experience with the 'Point' on previous occasions, I hastened half-way, and met this gentleman, who kindly mounted the rock for me, as I was prevented doing so owing to a recently-sprained ankle, which put the veto upon any undue exertion such as climbing.

"I would have gone right up to you if I could have carried you down the steep, but I felt that I would have ignominiously failed had I attempted it, so this gentleman kindly went up for me. I hope you are not hurt in any way? It was madness for you to have risked such a climb in this awful weather."

Marcella's heart contracted with a sudden gladness. The voice of the second man was the curate's, Philip Nullius, and somehow it put a new courage into her. Her pale face flushed with a colour Edward Day was keen to note, and her eyes brightened.

"You, Mr. Nullius?" she exclaimed. "Oh, I am so glad! You will take me back to the Court, won't you? I think I am all right now, only a little shaken. But I am anxious to return to father; he will be so worried about my absence." She struggled to her feet, then turned to the man who had carried her down to the shore. She had not forgotten that he had wilfully insulted and abused a dead mother's memory, just because her rejection had piqued his vanity.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Day," she said, with a gracious coldness. "You rescued me from a perilous position on Danger Point, and I am glad Mr. Nullius was here to draw your attention to me. I owe my life to him, and incidentally to you also. Had it not been for him, you might have passed on."

He bit his lip savagely. He felt her words were a dismissal. She looked upon the poverty-stricken curate as her saviour—not himself. Aloud he said:

"I will see you safely to the Court, Marcella. Your friend, Mr. Nullius, may be eager to continue his visits to the rest of his flock; we had better not detain him."

Philip Nullius' dark face coloured slightly, and he raised his hat preparatory to leaving. The calling of Sir Cyprian's daughter by her Christian name had struck him with a strange feeling that the fair fashionable Londoner was the lover of the girl who had been for so many weeks enshrined in his holy of holies as the most perfect woman he knew.

"Stop!" Marcella said coolly. "Mr. Nullius, will you relieve this gentleman of his self-appointed task, and accompany me home to the Court; that is, if your ankle is strong enough?" Then turning to the chagrined Edward, she went on carelessly: "I will not detain you any longer, Mr. Day; you must have plenty to do on your brief visit to Crawley, and my father has not those attractions at the Court that would appeal to you!"

As she strolled painfully and slowly away, leaning on the arm of the tall young curate, Edward Day looked after them with a bitter smile on his weak, vindictive face.

"Snubbed, eh?" he muttered. "Shelved for the society of a beggarly curate whom you credit with all the virtues under the sun! So, ho! Miss Marcella, you remember our last parting in London and mean to keep me at arm's length. Evidently your dear aunt has not informed you of the change in my fortunes, and I shall do nothing to enlighten you. You forbid me the Court, eh?" he laughed softly. "We shall see. There are many ways of reaching one's destination, and judging from your leisurely stroll, you will not get there for some little time."

The storm had abated almost as suddenly as it had risen, and only a dull murmur of the still turbulent sea, and the dismal soughing of the wind, remained as witness to the reckless gale that had swept over the recently sunny landscape. It was growing dark, and the fine rain that was steadily pouring from the heavens had ceased to lash as at first.

In the meantime Marcella and the curate slowly walked along the sea coast in the direction of the Court. The wet had penetrated to their very being, and they shivered, but both were strangely contented.

"Tell me," Philip Nullius said abruptly, "what took you up Danger Point in such weather as this? Surely it was not your own choice?"

Marcella laughed weakly. "My father told me that it was an interesting walk," she said. "Of course he did not know the danger in which the sudden gale would place me. He will be very anxious about me."

The curate was silent. He remembered that it was strange for an old inhabitant like Sir Cyprian not to have thought that such a walk as that to Danger Point would be dangerous to a girl who was ignorant of the treacherous freaks of the elements.

"Will you see your—your friend at the Court?" he inquired slowly.

"I hope not," Marcella answered briefly; "he is not a friend, he is my aunt's nephew, and I dislike him immensely, but occasionally tolerate him."

A sigh escaped the lips of the man by her side. It seemed almost that he was relieved by her statement.

"Then—then—you are not engaged to him?" he stammered. "I imagined you were!"

Marcella flushed deeply; the rain splashed against her hot cheeks as she turned her face to him.

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"Engaged to that man!" she repeated. "Oh. Mr. Nullius, I thought you understood me better than to think such a thing of me!" The reproach in her voice stung him.

"I wish I were in a position to understand you as I do myself," he exclaimed passionately; "but whenever I fancy that I know you just a little more, Miss Rust, I suddenly remember that the village curate, obscure and unknown, with probably a shameful parentage, has no right to try to understand the Lady Bountiful of the village!"

"You can never be obscure to me," she said gently, "because, Mr. Nullius, I recognise that you are my equal—or more so—that I am your inferior! You will one day have the living here, perhaps," she went on, "and then will lose that sense of not being equal with the people who are beneath you. I am always your friend," she added softly. "I hope you will remember that."

The curate's dark eyes met hers wistfully. "I will never forget it, Miss Rust. It will be a memory with a halo round it when I have left Crawley."

"Left Crawley," she said quickly. "Why, oh, Mr. Nullius, what has made you think of leaving?"

"The same reason that actuates the decision of all men with a sense of honour," he answered bitterly. "I cannot trust myself to stay here without doing what would lower me not only in the eyes of everyone in the parish, but particularly in those of the woman for whose sake I am leaving Crawley."

"Then you—love!" she breathed. "And the woman—does she reciprocate?"

"I do not know," he said slowly. "I dare not ask her. It is better to leave in ignorance. At any rate I shall have my honour left to me; I shall not have dragged it in the mud by declaring my love for a rich woman, when I have nothing in turn to offer her. Don't you think I am wise?"

"If you ask me, Mr. Nullius," she said in a low tone, "the woman would rather you let her be the judge of what is best. She will know at once whether your love is more acceptable than money; she will know which she prefers—the glitter of gold, or the smile in your eyes. In justice to her you should let her be the arbiter of her fate. It is cruel to deny her the divine prerogative of her sex to bring joy to the man she loves!"

The curate's breath came hoarsely to her ears. It was too dark to see him; she only knew that his eyes were searching her face.

"You advise me to tell her?" he whispered. "To play pitch-and-toss with my happiness, and to be denied the humble privilege I have hitherto enjoyed—that of occasionally seeing her face and hearing her voice?"

She came to an abrupt standstill.

"Let her rather exercise the right of royalty, Mr. Nullius; let her bestow upon you the mark of royal favour! Then the blame will be on her shoulders—not yours. Don't be a cowardly suitor and flee the Court of Love; rather stay and be knighted 'Sir Chosen.' With a tremulous laugh, a blend of tears and smiles, she held out the hand that had remained concealed beneath her coat. It clutched a faded rose.

Philip Nullius grasped her hand tightly.

"You mean?" he said hoarsely.

The clouds hid the smile that fluttered to her lips; half-proud, half-frightened.

"That you are knighted a courtier in the Palace of Love!" she whispered.

He drew her closer.

"Marcella! Can I be awake—or is it a dream?"

She laughed tenderly.

"A dream—Love's Young Dream," she murmured; then, after a pause, in which the rain beat unnoticed against their faces, and the wind lashed them with cutting gusts, Marcella spoke again:

"Oh, Philip, how long it took me to change you from a democrat into a courtier, but now the 'Order of the Ribbon' will tie you to me for ever!"

FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.

"White Heather."

WHEN Marcella and Philip arrived at the Court it was quite dark, and the lights twinkled from the many windows that faced the long avenue leading up to the hall door.

"Come in with me," Marcella said softly—"let me tell father that you are not only my rescuer but the man I love."

"Dearest," he replied tenderly, "you do not know Sir Cyprian as I do. He would immediately think that I had presumed upon my position as your protector to force my attentions upon you—and in his anger and disappointment, he would deny you to me and perhaps take you away. Wait until I have obtained that living that is almost mine, then we will tell him together. It will only be for a few weeks now."

Marcella was silent. She would dearly have loved to have created a barrier between herself and her cousin, Edward Day. She distrusted him, and the open acknowledgment of her engagement would have shown him that all further hopes in her direction were out of the question.

But she saw the wisdom of her lover's advice, to wait until he had obtained the "living" for which he had worked, as then there would be more chance of Sir Cyprian listening to him. So, after a tender leave-taking, under the shadow of the trees, Marcella entered the Court by herself.

The hall was empty, but in the second hall opening out of it, and which generally was used as a smoking lounge, three figures stood near the glowing log fire.

They did not turn as Marcella stood motionless in the doorway, but she recognised Sir Cyprian, whose face was grave beyond the common; the second man was a stranger, with a particularly fine face, and kindly eyes, that Marcella instinctively felt she could trust. Then she remembered that her father had been expecting an old friend to stay with him, and guessed the identity of the new-comer.

The third figure was so much in the dark that she could only discern the faint outline of a man standing beside a mailed figure in armour. With a swift movement she gathered up her wet, clinging skirts and turned a little to the right towards the wide staircase, preferring rather to meet her father's guests in more conventional attire than a dishevelled dress, and wild, wind-tossed hair, whose moist strands still clung to her forehead.

As she moved noiselessly, the man standing in the shadow of the armour spoke suddenly, and Marcella caught her breath with a cry of amazement. It was the voice of the man whom she had hoped had accepted her snub, and left Crawley, or else had gone where she would never meet him again—at least until she could openly claim the protection of her lover from his attentions.

"How dared Edward Day come here when he knew that I did not desire his society even from Danger Point!" she thought angrily.

"Marcella can't be very long now, sir," he was saying, in his languid, aristocratic voice. "I left her under the care of the village curate; she probably desired to ask him questions regarding the Sunday-school, or on some other rural point. Anyway, I felt rather in the way, and came on alone. Marcella is in good hands, doubtless, though for

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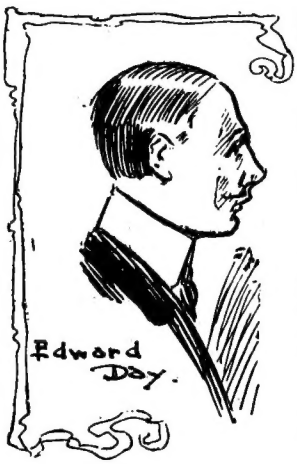

myself I don't much fancy that curate chap. He has a sneaking way about him, as though he would think nothing of trying to be the social equal of a girl like Marcella."

Marcella's face burnt with indignation as she listened to the cruel, insidious tongue of her cousin—or rather the man she still imagined to be her cousin. That he had said the very words to incense her father against Philip, she knew only too well.

Sir Cyprian was a great believer in the distinction between the "rich man" and the village "Lazarus," and she guessed why Edward Day had so early paved the road to distrust and enmity against her lover in her father's mind. He was jealous already of her preference for the obscure curate. She pressed a little against the portière, the heavy folds of which fell round her, screening her from view.

"The curate!" Sir Cyprian's voice said, in tones of icy disgust. "I am surprised Marcella should show such a radical strain as to prefer *his* society to yours, her cousin! He is a worthy young man, I have no doubt, but Marcella must remember that she is the future mistress of the Court after me, and should learn that dignity befitting her position."

"What is the curate's name?" said the courteous voice of the man whose face had attracted Marcella. "After all, Rust, you must not forget that from curates have sprung our Deans, Bishops, and Archbishops. The church gives high honours to her servants."

The eyes of the listening girl sparkled with joy. Her lover had one defender already! She felt she almost loved the owner of the voice that had spoken so generously of an absent man.

"I admit the truth of your words, Slade," Sir Cyprian answered, with a sarcastic laugh, "but in the church, as in every other profession, it is influence that helps a man to success, and so far as I know this curate, Philip Nullius, has no prospects. The vicar tells me he came from some charity school!"

"Poor lad," murmured Dr. Slade, "all the more credit to him for having got on so well."

"Still," suggested the oily voice of Edward Day with a sneering laugh, "that is no excuse for his presumption in forcing himself upon Miss Rust, sir. Penniless adventurers have been members of the church before now, and the little I know about this curate is not very reassuring. He is a man of absolutely obscure parentage, and I should hardly consider him the sort of person of whom my cousin should make a friend."

"Coward! Despicable coward!" breathed Marcella, as she reached her room in safety, and gazed at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were gleaming, and her cheeks flushed with the wave of contempt that swept over her, as she thought of the cruel, back-biting man who stooped to insinuate vile motives to another man immeasurably his superior in every way.

Her maid looked at her young mistress curiously. "Lor, miss," she exclaimed, "you'll catch your death of cold if you don't change quickly—you are drenched to the skin, miss, with being out in this storm!"

Marcella laughed carelessly. "A hot bath will put me all right, Jane; a little rain won't hurt me."

The maid went about her duties quietly, and when, refreshed and glowing from the contact of the warm water, Marcella sat down to have her hair dressed, Jane said:

"The housekeeper is so put about, miss; the master sent for 'er some time ago, and told 'er to prepare one of the guest rooms in the north wing for Mr. Day, who will stay till next week, and she did think it a shame she should 'ave been told so late—only just before dinner."

Marcella frowned. The thought that Edward Day should be living under her own roof for even a few hours was distasteful to her.

She wondered uneasily whether her visit to Danger Point rock had not been the beginning of a succession of ominous events, in which the only bright one was her secret engagement to Philip Nullius; but aloud, she said quietly: "Don't gossip, Jane. The housekeeper has not much cause to complain. The Court sees very few guests at present. Take out my white satin dress, and my pearls," she went on, "I will wear them to-night."

When she was dressed Marcella dismissed her maid, and going to her writing-table, opened a box that had arrived that morning from an old school-fellow at the Convent in Brussels, and who now was staying in Scotland.

In the box lay a wreath of white heather, and a few words written in a hasty girlish hand.

"DEAREST MARCELLA,—*I am sending you some white heather. It is very rare now, and it has taken me a long time to get enough to make the inclosed wreath. You know the old adage, don't you?—that if you wear white heather on any special event in your life, only good fortune can follow you! So I am inclosing this wreath of heather for you to don when you wish your luck to be especially brilliant! Let me know if the proverb comes true in your case, dear! If it does not it will prove a very strange exception.—In haste, your affectionate friend,*

"DIANA WESTBROOK."

Marcella smiled as she folded the note, then took up the wreath of white heather and looked at it. "This is a special event in my life to-night," she murmured. "My engagement to Philip Nullius! It is strange that Diana should have sent this now. The very day on which I desire my luck to be bright and prosperous. Yes, I will test Diana's adage and wear her heather, and I trust it will be a harbinger of joy for Philip and myself."

Quickly removing the pearls from her hair she fastened the wreath around the soft coils of her brown tresses, then picking up her fan, she left the room and went downstairs to the drawing-room.

"Ah, Marcella," Sir Cyprian said quickly, "I am glad to see, child, that your adventure has left you none the worse. You were fortunate to be in such good hands."

Marcella looked at her father thoughtfully, then said quietly: "Yes, father. Had Mr. Nullius not heard my cry, and being unable to get up the Point himself on account of a sprained ankle, sent Mr. Day to bring me down, I should still have been on Danger Point—or, rather, over it!"

A curious expression crossed Sir Cyprian's face. Then it vanished, as he said suavely: "I referred to your cousin, Edward Day, as the 'good hands' in which you were, my dear. It was he who brought you down to safety—Mr. Nullius merely played a secondary part."

Marcella shrugged her shoulders. "The subject is hardly worth arguing about. *I* am inclined to think that I owe a great deal to Mr. Nullius—*you*, that I owe a great deal to Edward Day! Why discuss it any further? You must introduce me to your friend," she went on, with a gracious smile, turning to Dr. Slade, who since her entrance had watched her with searching eyes and a slightly amused smile as he heard her put her important father on one side so carelessly.

Sir Cyprian concealed his vexation, as he said lightly: "This is my truant daughter, Slade! Don't you think she is a handful to begin contradicting her old father on her return from a dangerous adventure?"

"I think Miss Marcella shows a very pretty spirit in defending the person to whom she considers she owes her life!" he replied laughingly. Then addressing Marcella, he said admiringly: "Forgive me for noticing your unusual decoration, Miss Marcella. White heather is quite a Scottish amulet for good luck."

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Marcella laughed. "I am wearing it for that reason, sir," she returned prettily. "I have a wish for this day to begin a new era in my life—much has changed it for me."

A strange light leapt into the pale eyes of Edward Day as he came up to her with suppressed eagerness. His vanity was supreme, yet he hardly dared hope that it was his influence that had changed his cousin's life.

"Let me beg for one leaf of the heather, Marcella," he said laughingly. "My luck needs repairing badly. I'm sure you won't refuse me."

She drew back sharply, and shook her head. "No, I shall share my good fortune with no one. It is mine to mar or to cherish, and I prefer to cherish it."

SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

Marcella Flings Down the Gauntlet.

AFTER dinner Marcella went into the drawing-room and scribbled a note to Lady Violet. She remembered that her aunt had asked her always to write her when she felt worried or in any way lonely, and in spite of her happiness there was a subtle something in the air that told her that her cousin's presence in the Court would work some ill to her, or her lover..

"*I wish you were here, dear aunt,*" she wrote. "*I want to pour something into your sympathetic ear, and, besides, I want to feel you near me. Did you know that Edward was here? He came to the Court this evening and is staying some days.—I am your always loving,* "MARCELLA."

She stamped and sealed her letter, then turned to see Sir Cyprian at her side. "Well, Marcella," he said gently, "Writing to your aunt? Give me your letter. I will put it in the post-bag with mine." Then he went on quickly, "I am sorry that you should have snubbed your cousin, dear. He is a nice fellow, and having just obtained a post as secretary to the financier Caleb J. Johnson, seems in a position to become a wealthy man."

"I don't like him," she said coldly.

He smiled. "Perhaps you prefer the curate?"

Marcella laughed. "That's rather rough on Mr. Nullius, father. He deserves a better comparison than Edward Day. "Ah," she cried mockingly, as the portière shook slightly. "Don't be afraid, Edward. Come in openly. I am not ashamed of my opinion of you. Come and hear it."

With a livid face and skulking manner, he came forward and looked at her, radiant in her white glitter of satin, and with the wreath of heather resting on her dark hair.

"Be silent, Marcella," said her father coldly. "I forbid you to speak like that to my guest and your cousin. I forbid you also to hold any further communication with the curate, Philip Nullius! Do you hear me?"

An expression like that which had been in the face of Lady Violet on the occasion of her last interview with Sir Cyprian crept into the face of the baronet's daughter.

"I hear you—yes, father," she said slowly, "but I cannot obey you. I am over twenty-one, you know, and my own mistress. And to-night I have given my allegiance to someone who will come first with me in future."

Sir Cyprian took a step towards her, then stopped abruptly as though recollecting that it would not do to drop his mask before her. "What do you mean, child?" he said, with a forced smile. "Are you mad, or playing a practical joke on me and your cousin?"

"Mad," she laughed recklessly, forgetting the secret she had agreed to keep, in her eagerness to humiliate the man who had dared to spy upon her. "No, not mad, unless it is with love. I mean that there will be no further occasion for Mr. Day to annoy me, nor you to question me, father. I am engaged to the curate, Philip Nullius!"

A muttered imprecation rose to the younger man's lips, but Sir Cyprian stopped him with a raised hand. His face was very pale, and his eyes shone brilliantly.

"I won't discuss this matter any further, Marcella," he said gently. "You are naturally overstrung, and not yourself. It would be unkind to take you seriously; Dr. Slade has gone out for a stroll, or I would ask him to see you; but go to bed now, my child, and rest—a good long sleep will work wonders."

"But—but," Marcella faltered, feeling that her bold stroke had fallen strangely flat, "I am quite well, and know what I am talking about—I am engaged to Mr. Nullius. Nothing will alter that!" She spoke defiantly, yet the stillness with which her words were received struck a sudden chill in her. She had expected anger, argument, pleading—anything but this pitying commiseration.

Edward Day's white face stood out like a cameo—only his eyes gleamed viciously upon her, and Sir Cyprian's voice grew even more gentle, as he said:

"Come, dear, you must go to bed. To-morrow I will let you talk to me as long as you like, but now I will not risk the responsibility of letting you talk yourself into any great excitement." He held the door open, and feeling that she somehow had failed to hit the note of dignity and outraged pride at which she had struck, Marcella left the room with burning cheeks and stately head.

The door closed gently upon her. Then Sir Cyprian turned and looked at his sister-in-law's nephew. "Come, my boy. Cheer up"—he laughed—"girls always talk like that! Marcella is like other girls. You and I must prevent her from following up her folly!"

"We must not let that miserable curate win her, sir!" panted the young man.

Sir Cyprian laughed again. "That will be easy to prevent, Edward. It rests with you to help me keep Marcella at the Court, or let her waste her beauty in a cottage with the curate."

Edward Day bit his lips. "I would do anything," he muttered, "anything to keep them apart."

Sir Cyprian looked at him sharply. "Anything," he murmured. "Well, well—we shall see! You may be able to help me, and your cousin from making a *mesalliance*."

Edward Day leant forward, his white, passionate face startling even the self-possessed baronet.

"Anything!" he repeated, with a hysterical laugh. "Yes, I would do anything to keep that miserable curate from winning her. I would commit any crime even—break any law—to stand between them."

When he had retired to the library to wait for his old friend the doctor to join him after his ramble, Sir Cyprian sat smoking silently, deep in thought. Once or twice he muttered: "That hot-headed fool will be as pliable as wax! His love for the girl will be a powerful lever. I shall touch the notes, and they, the unconscious instruments, will make the music.

"Danger Point cheated me this afternoon. But I must not let the elements interfere with my plans. Providence has a knack of slipping in between the arrangements of man in a way not always pleasing. I must so work that Providence will have no chance of thwarting me." He drew from his pocket the letter Marcella had given to him to post, and read it with cynical smile—then flung it on the fire.

"So, there are confidences with her aunt already, are there? I must stop these!"

As he took up another cigar the door opened suddenly, and Dr. Slade came into the room. His face was

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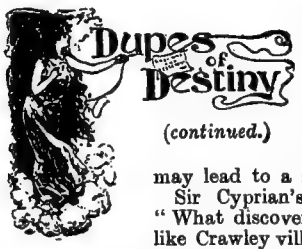

(continued.)

alive with an intense excitement, and his voice trembled, as he caught the baronet's shoulder.

"Cyprian, old man, I have made a discovery!" he cried. "I've a good mind to follow it up—it may lead to a sensational story."

Sir Cyprian's blue eyes opened lazily. "What discovery could you make in a place like Crawley village?" he laughed.

"The discovery," continued the doctor impressively, "that the young curate at whom you and your nephew laughed this evening, is one of the children of that poor girl I attended on board the Australian liner twenty-five years ago. He is the boy whose history is wrapped in secret mystery. And I am going to find it out. That fellow, Rust, is no ordinary waif—you will find in time that he may prove himself even a fitting match for your lovely young daughter—more so than that puppy Edward Day!"

Sir Cyprian turned languidly in his chair. He looked interested, and his cigar had gone out. "That sounds quite romantic; 'pon my soul, Slade," he said gently, "you ought to be a novelist! Because you brought a waif into the world twenty-five years ago, you jump to the conclusion that all succeeding waifs must be your special one.

"I suppose," he went on, "you met the curate serenading my daughter."

"No," snapped the doctor. "I met him at the dispensary of the doctor here; he was getting bandages for an old woman. We strolled into the village together, and by a few leading questions, which he answered rapidly enough, I patched up the facts. He was sent to the Foundling Home that my waif had been sent to—the same year, the same month, and they told him in the house that he had come from a ship as a baby. I like the boy, and for his dead unknown mother's sake, I will try to help him." Then with an angry snort Dr. Slade slammed the door behind him.

Sir Cyprian rose, looked at himself in the glass, then smiled softly.

"I shall have to be particularly careful—particularly prompt. Those inquiries must be nipped in the bud by Fate. The curate must *always* be 'Philip Nullius!' It will be safer for him than—*than the other!*" He shivered, and glanced at the door. "It's strange, Marcella, and that—that boy—if it should be so! But," he exclaimed suddenly, and with a tightening of his lips, "I must step in between, and turn the wheel of Fate towards myself. Nothing shall intervene—nothing can cast me from my position—nothing, except——"

With another shiver he switched the light off, and opening the door, went softly to his own room.

SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

Sir Cyprian Makes an Offer.

The first thing Marcella did the following morning was to escape as soon after breakfast as she could without offending her father's guests, and steal out of the Court by a side door in the garden, then make her way through the few fields that lay between her home and the parish church.

She felt she wanted to see her lover, to tell him that in her anger the night before she had betrayed their secret, and broken her word to him.

As she walked up the quiet church yard, Philip Nullius came out of the vestry door.

There had been a choir practice, and he had been glad to get away from the singing, and seize the chance of a few quiet minutes to himself. He wanted to think of this woman whose gift of love had changed the world from a dull grey monotony into a brilliant place of promise and joy. He was loved—and he loved! The whole of his past life rose before him in contrast with the radiant visions that lay full of beauty at his feet.

And at the door of the vestry he came face to face with the woman of his dreams! Marcella swayed towards him with a tender smile.

"Philip!"

"Marcella!"

The sunlight flashed upon them—the birds in the ivy that clustered up the walls of the church chirrupped one to the other, but they only heard the throbbing of each other's hearts—only saw the love-light in each other's faces.

At last Marcella spoke. "I have a confession to make," she faltered. "I—I—oh, Philip—I could not help it, but I told my father, before my cousin Edward, that I was engaged to you. I was annoyed with him, and forgot that you had asked me to wait until you had obtained the living that you expected. Forgive me."

"Forgive," he murmured. "How can you ask me, darling! After all I am glad that you were open and frank at first. Perhaps I was in the wrong to have suggested your silence until I had made sure of the living. You were right, darling, to have spoken at once. I will see Sir Cyprian to-day. Was he very angry with you?"

Marcella blushed. "Well, I can hardly say," she murmured. "He seemed to think that I was not in a fit state to be argued with about anything. He did not take me at all seriously, and suggested that a good night's rest would put me right. But oh! Philip," she said, with a sudden burst of fear, "you understood last night that I knew what I was talking about when I gave you my heart for all time, didn't you? My father thought I was joking, but—but you knew that I was never more serious in my life than I was then?"

His eyes flashed eagerly into hers.

"Darling, I know that last night you made me the proudest and happiest of men. I can understand your father not crediting you with a serious motive in declaring your love for such an ineligible fellow as myself," he added sadly. "But I will work hard, and prove myself almost worthy of your love, my darling, though now I am indeed but a poor match for the heiress of Sir Cyprian Rust."

"Don't say that," she murmured. "Since love levels all things, then it has made us equals. And, oh! Philip, you have changed the world for me! Before I had only Aunt Violet to love—somehow I could never feel more than respect and obedience for my father, though he has always been very good to me, but you have put rose-coloured glasses on my eyes, and I see the world through tender tints!"

It was a very secluded spot that the vestry door of the Parish Church opened upon, great trees hung protecting branches almost over to the church walls, and the strip of vivid green was trodden by no feet save those of the vicar—the curate, and the boys who went in to choir practice on week days, and to church on Sundays.

There was no possible chance of the handsome curate and the lovely heiress of the Court being interrupted in their stolen love-making outside the vestry door, and safe in their knowledge of these simple facts the lovers indulged in those sweet greetings that mean so much when exchanged between "two hearts that beat as one," and in whose eyes the sun rises, and sets.

So Marcella nestled in her lover's arms and received his kisses as her due homage, revelling in the knowledge that there—outside the vestry door—within the shadow of the church, they could exchange their tender love words safe in the seclusion of the rarely-trodden path.

"And"—Philip Nullius said in a deep, tender voice—"you are really mine, beloved! Wherever you go, in whatever brilliant assembly your duty takes you, your heart will remain true to the obscure curate in your father's parish? It is almost cruel to let you make a sacrifice like this," he went on bitterly. "Your youth and beauty should have a better setting that I can give them—yet a deeper love will never be found than mine for you, beloved."

"Hush!" she said softly. "If there is any sacrifice at all, Philip, it is one that I welcome with all my heart. Love delights in sacrifices, and it is only a joy for me to escape from the artificial atmosphere of the London drawing-rooms,

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where I meet men cast in the same insipid mould as my cousin, Edward Day, and it is no loss to lose sight of such men as he.

"Only this morning I thought that, compared with your honest, straightforward nature the strained, unnatural compliments of Edward Day were an insult to a self-respecting woman. I felt that a nasty insect had crawled across my hand when he touched it—and I shivered."

A woman's hand was pressed against the glass panel!

A light, sneering laugh broke the lovers' confidences, and, turning with crimson cheeks and frightened eyes, Marcella saw her father and her cousin, Edward Day.

Sir Cyprian looked sad and reproachful, an air of dignity seemed to have touched him, and in the presence of such silent reproof, Marcella became suddenly like a small child caught on forbidden ground. Edward Day, on the other hand, was smiling at her with a leering expression that gave his cruel face an additional menace.

Sir Cyprian broke the silence. He addressed himself to Marcella, ignoring the presence of the tall, grave young curate, who stood so calmly beside his daughter.

"You had better return to the Court, child," he said gently. "I am of course astonished and hurt at your conduct, but," he shrugged his shoulders, "youth and indiscretion always run hand-in-hand, so I will not say any more, except that you should be glad that your father and cousin only witnessed your disgrace, and for our own sakes you may rely on us not to publish it broadcast."

"Father," Marcella cried, with flashing eyes. "How can you speak like that! I am not ashamed of myself. I have every right to be here with Mr. Nullius. He is my future husband, as I told you last night. Tell them, Philip," she went on, in a quivering voice. "Tell them that we are engaged!"

"Your daughter has done me the honour of accepting me as her future husband, Sir Cyprian," began Philip Nullius. "I wished to call and see you to-day."

Sir Cyprian, ignoring his words entirely, turned to his nephew. "You see," he said sadly, "how the poor girl is induced to believe that she means the nonsense this young man has put into her mouth."

Then addressing Marcella, who had grown a little pale, he said gently; "Now, my dear, run along home and try to rest. I see you are inclined to be wild in your speech again, and to encourage unconventional proposals in a manner that would be impossible were you not under the influence of this man!"

Marcella cast an appealing glance at her lover, who had also grown white and stern looking, but he smiled reassuringly at her as he said quietly:

"Do as your father wishes now, dearest. We understand each other, and nothing can take back the vows we have sworn."

"Good-bye," she returned. "I love *you*, Philip, and no one"—with a defiant ring in her voice—"can rob us of each other. Good-bye, darling!"

With a last tender look she moved away, then paused, and glanced back at the three men.

"Go home, Philip," she said. "I don't wish you to stay long after I have gone. For my sake be wise and refuse to quarrel, however great your provocation."

As she walked down the path that led into the road, her cousin caught her up.

"Your village lover shall not be ill-treated, Marcella!" he said laughingly. "I shall not stay to frighten him."

She looked at him contemptuously. "*You* frighten him!" she said slowly. "Why, one blow from Philip Nullius would half kill you. You have more reason to fear *him*. Go back, I wish to be alone; had I desired society I would have called my dogs to follow me. I do not care for mongrels!"

He stood where she left him, his eyes full of hate and rage. "Mongrel, am I! All right, my lady Marcella! The mongrel will teach the thoroughbred a lesson one day."

In the meantime Sir Cyprian was speaking to the curate, who had briefly stated his love for Marcella, and his modest expectations.

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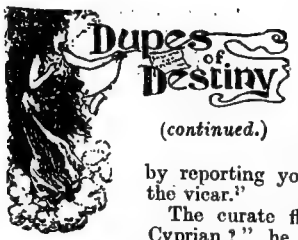

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"I am glad that you have spoken so openly," said the baronet, looking at him intently, "and in spite of my disapproval of this sort of thing, I will, on one condition, not punish my daughter or you, by reporting your breach of confidence to the vicar."

The curate flushed. "And that is, Sir Cyprian?" he said quickly.

"That you don't attempt to see my daughter for a month, or to tell her by letter anything of the confidence or conversation that passed between us, Mr. Nullius," Sir Cyprian began slowly. "She is highly excitable, and I sometimes fear for her reason in those moments of mad, passionate rage. I have this proposal to make to you, and if you consent to it, you may succeed in making yourself financially better able to think of marrying.

"There is a friend of mine, a clergyman, living in the South of England. I will send you to him with a good letter of introduction, on those terms of silence concerning my daughter. She would think nothing of following you, and creating a scandal. Do you consent?" and Sir Cyprian's lip quivered with a suppressed emotion.

Philip Nullius hesitated. The thought of leaving Marcella in ignorance of his destiny or even his parting, was hard, since he knew that she would wonder and perhaps doubt because he had not trusted her.

But, on the other hand, he was desirous of winning a chance of making a better home than he had at present to offer any woman, and as his annual holiday was drawing near, which would mean a month, he thought it a good plan to accept Sir Cyprian's offer, and so please him, though it hurt him to feel that he was going to do something to bring tears to those dear eyes. But the living—the extra income it might mean—decided him, and, besides, Marcella's father had made the offer.

"Yes," he said simply. "I will accept your terms, sir, and on my honour I agree to do as you ask, only you will tell Marcella that I am away on business for you, sir?"

Sir Cyprian smiled distantly. "Certainly, Mr. Nullius. She shall hear enough to ease her mind concerning your safety."

As Philip Nullius went off in the direction of the village, Sir Cyprian smiled softly as though well pleased.

"Well, sir," said Edward Day, "has he listened to the voice of reason?"

"Mr. Nullius has agreed with me," replied the baronet gently, "that it will do his health good to start on a month's holiday."

The two pairs of eyes—both blue, both wicked—met in a steady glance.

"A month's holiday," murmured Edward Day thoughtfully, "that will be very good for him I should think, sir."

Sir Cyprian nodded and linked his arm in that of the younger man. "Yes, Edward. A lot can happen in a month. Let us hope that Mr. Nullius will meet only with the good luck we both desire him on his month's holiday. You must console Marcella, while I"—he sighed—"while I arrange matters concerning our friend the curate."

Then laughing softly, both men strolled down the narrow strip of gravel between the graves, and slowly sauntered towards the Court, their arms linked, like their lives, in a bond of fellowship.

EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

What Marcella Saw.

Two days later Marcella, who had been kept indoors on account of a nasty chill, the result of her experience on Danger Point, sat down at her little writing-table and penned a letter. It was to her lover, and in it she begged him to write her and tell her what had passed between her father and himself. Then she sealed it, and addressing Jane, who was waiting on her, said with a slight blush:

"I want you to leave this letter at Mr. Nullius' rooms, Jane. Don't let it go out of your hands until it is in his possession. It is an important letter."

"Mr. Nullius, miss," replied Jane, a great understanding regarding her young mistress' troubled eyes, coming in a sudden flash upon her. "Why, miss, it's the talk in the village that Mr. Nullius is going away this afternoon. And there are some as says that there is a lot be'ind it. He looks so sad like!"

Marcella caught the woman's arm. "Away, did you say, Jane?" she cried. "Then there is no time to be lost—none! He will be starting by the two o'clock express from Crawley to London; I know the train, you must go down to the station, Jane, and put that letter into Mr. Nullius' hands. Do you hear? Go now! I will finish that lace you were unpicking. You have just an hour before the train goes—hurry—hurry!"

Jane hesitated. Servants are keen to read between the lines of a family estrangement, and Jane guessed that her handsome, high-spirited young mistress, had vexed Sir Cyprian because of her liking for the society of the fascinating curate.

But she loved her mistress, and she feared Sir Cyprian, and Jane had all an old maid's liking to see the ways of lovers made easy. So she took the letter obediently, and slipped out of the Court by the servant's entrance, and started at a jog trot for the station, which was three miles off.

Marcella walked up and down the dainty sitting-room which was her own special den. She was wondering how it came to pass that Philip Nullius should be leaving Crawley without letting her see him to say good-bye. She knew he loved her, and yet he was going off without making a single attempt to see her.

What did it mean? Whose hand was moving beneath it all? She could not help thinking that her father, and, incidentally, her cousin, had a share in the departure of her lover.

Her eyes flashed and her cheeks paled with a sudden resolve that, let come what may, she would fight her enemies and his, and not be moved one inch from the course she had marked out for herself.

She wished, however, that she had received an answer to her letter to Lady Violet. She longed for the sympathetic voice and caressing smile of that beautiful aunt, and her silence was a little disappointing.

She preferred to keep to her room, for Edward Day was still in the house, and she had determined not to meet him again, or to leave the privacy of her own rooms until the unwelcome guest had gone. After what seemed an interminable length of time, Jane returned, hot, panting, but triumphant.

"Did you see Mr. Nullius?" Marcella said quickly.

Jane nodded. "I was just in time, miss, the train was on the point of starting when I saw Mr. Nullius on the platform. 'E was quite alone, so I stepped up to 'im and gave 'im your letter. 'Is face lit up sudden-like, and he opened it quick, then said to me, very slow and impressive:

"'Tell your mistress that all is well. Not to worry or to think that I shall forget our conversation outside the church. I am going away on business that will be a means of my future advancement.' Then he wrote some words on a bit of paper and put it in your envelope. I got away, miss, just as Sir Cyprian drove into the station, but 'e didn't see me, 'is eyes were all on Mr. Nullius."

Silently Marcella took the note. That her lover was going away openly was a relief, but why had he not called or written before, and what did her father's presence at the station portend?

She untwisted the note and read the pencilled words:

"*Sweetheart—good-bye, my thoughts and heart's love are yours. I love you.*—P. N."

She pressed the words to her lips, with a sigh. Philip was gone. She could only possess her soul in patience and wait

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till he returned. Perhaps after all, her father was not so hard as she had imagined.

She dined alone, and after writing another letter to her aunt, went out into the corridor for a stroll. She knew that her father and his guests would be smoking and playing billiards, and she was not afraid of meeting them.

She found herself after a time near the wing that contained the mysterious door her father's valet had forbidden her to enter. It was the corridor through which the dark, silent man had passed, then vanished. She looked at it and saw the key in the lock, and acting on a sudden impulse, passed through, and turned the key. She was on the right side of the unused wing now.

Walking softly, aided by a dim flicker of light, she came to the door that Deacon had barred. The key was in that also.

Marcella smiled. Her father's servants were strangely lax in their supervision.

She pushed the door gently, it yielded, and she found herself at the top of a flight of stairs that finished in darkness.

She poised irresolutely on the narrow landing. It was dirty and did not look inviting. After all, why trouble about lumber rooms. Deacon was right, the dust was awful.

As she turned to retrace her steps a sound filtered through the darkness to her acute hearing. It was a faint cry. She listened, and it was repeated. Then with a swift spurt of courage, Marcella went down the stairs, and found herself in a passage, fairly clean.

On one side was a door, and in front of the door hung a curtain. Cautiously, and with quickened breath, Marcella lifted one end of the curtain, then stood petrified with amazement.

The panels in the door were of glass, transparent; and pressed against one of the panels, as though tired of beating it, was a white delicate hand.

It was the hand of a woman!

(Another long instalment of this serial next week.)

MR. PORKHAM: "Again I ask you, Miss Leflard, will you be my wife?" Miss Leflard: "No, Mr. Porkham, I cannot be your wife; but I will be——" Mr. Porkham: "A sister, of course." Miss Leflard: "No; a grandmother. Your grandfather proposed last night."

JESS: "Jack's entire truthfulness was what captivated me." Bess: "What did he say when he proposed to you?" Jess: "It ran thus—'I have never loved a woman as I do you since—since'—(referring to his notebook)—'since—let me see—the 18th of August.'"

MAY (to her best young man): "Now, Charlie, you must be careful and not expose yourself to the weather. Now, you were out in the rain last night?" Charlie: "No, I wasn't, little one. What makes you think so?" May: "Why, papa came home and said he met you coming home from the lodge, and that you were thoroughly soaked."

HUSBAND: "Now, I think that is going too far. You promised me you would countermand your order for that dress." Wife: "I wrote to the dressmaker that very day." "But here are the dress and the bill for it—enough to make me bankrupt almost! How do you explain that?" "I gave you the letter to post, and I suppose you forgot it, as usual."

JOHNNY: "Oh, my prerogatives are chapped!" Father: "Why, what do you mean, Johnny—your lips?" Johnny: "I always thought they were lips until last night, when I saw Mr. Thayer kissing sister in the hall, and when I asked him what he was doing, he said he was only exercising his prerogative, so of—" Sister: "Father, will you put Johnny to bed?"

I HOPE you will all like "Decoyed!"—the new series of which the opening instalment appears in this number.

Nowadays my readers have been led to expect so much from *Short Stories* that it is by no means an easy matter to supply their very exacting demands, yet I flatter myself that I am gifted in being able to discriminate between just what they *do* and what they do *not* want. That is the reason why I think that "Decoyed!" will be a popular series.

The young lady who is narrating in these episodes the story of a noteworthy period of her life does not, of course, considering the position in Society she now occupies, wish for her real name to be disclosed, so she has concealed herself under the name of Vivienne d'Alton. For the same reason she has carefully disguised all other clues by which she could be personally traced. But for these slight exceptions, the experiences related are perfectly true, incomprehensible though they may appear to many readers. Others, who have themselves been the victims of unscrupulous persons, will understand how such marvellous things can happen in Society circles, even in the twentieth century. In the vast majority of cases where young girls are made the butt of swindlers, nothing of the scandals ever sees the light of day, because those who have suffered do not care to have their misfortunes made the subject of common gossip. Unfortunately, the rogues who systematically practise their loathsome calling, know this, and, in the end, when their misdeeds are discovered, they successfully trade on the feelings of those they have ensnared.

However, the lady who calls herself "Vivienne d'Alton" has decided to tell *Short Stories* readers of all that happened to her, so that they, if they are ever placed in similar circumstances, may steer clear of the danger she encountered.

IN a cheery letter that Private C. H. Williams, F. Company, 2nd South West Borderers, Bloemfontein, S. Africa, sends me, the writer states how he, being a Northampton man, was greatly interested in the account of the experiences of Sara Gillespie at that town. He deplores the fact that "being a soldier on the veld I can scarcely get any papers to read. I should especially like a complete set of *Short Stories* containing 'The Pursuit of Sara.'"

May I remind readers that though the actual Boer War is now happily over, there are still many thousands of British Tommies in the two new Colonies. These have the greatest difficulty in getting any literature to read, and you would be doing a very kind action if, after you had finished with this paper, you would forward it on to the men who carry the guns. This is almost the only way in which Tommy Atkins can get anything at all to read.

On page 35 there appears the first of a series of pictures illustrating types of English lovers in various centuries. Some Scottish ones will also appear.

Your Editor.

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LOVE— AND AN ACCIDENT.

How Robert Dutton Tried to Save His Honour.

"I SHALL never learn to feel indifferent about it, Robert."

"But, Muriel, don't you know that people who act in the most impassioned love scenes often hate each other?"

"Well, I am sure that sallow Italian girl loves you. Her soul is in her eyes when she is with you."

"Poor little Sigismunda!"

"You pity her—you *know* that she loves you!" exclaimed the young girl pettishly, drawing away from the arm to which she had been clinging in that openly affectionate manner which would have stamped them in the eyes of the most casual observer as betrothed lovers.

"Muriel, am I a conceited cad? I have felt sorry for the girl, who has to face trials of which you can't conceive. She was stolen in her babyhood by some man, I believe, and starved and beaten till her talent for singing was discovered. Then she was a street singer, a forlorn child out in the frozen streets—at tavern doors—in the crowd after a play—till her talent grew more marketable, and here she is."

"But the man does not own her now, does he?" asked Muriel with some interest.

"No, she is free. There is no one—she is alone in the world."

"No wonder there is such a hunger in her eyes, Robert. They devour you when she looks at you."

"You jealous little girl! Well, I'm afraid I like you being jealous," Robert said, holding her fast. "But do you think I care for the glances of those gloomy, dark, cavernous eyes, when such a blue, laughing, heavenly pair are watching me? Do you not know that I am thinking of you when I utter the burning, passionate words, and when I seem to enfold that poor girl in my arms I imagine you are there?"

"Don't make it too real, Robert, or she—she might mistake," whispered Muriel blissfully, looking up at the magnificent proportions of the being who was all her own, and feeling an ecstatic delight in her property. He was only a singer in comic opera, and there had been considerable opposition to the engagement, as the young woman's father, a dealer in tallow, did not behold the demigod with his daughter's eyes. But Muriel was an only child, and had never been opposed in her life. And it must be confessed that Robert Dutton was quite a presentable individual, with a well-bred air about him which rather confounded the tallow-chandler, and kept him at a distance.

The two young people were lingering in one of the bright little parks of our city, where the grass had grown emerald-green during the few days of Spring sunshine. On the boughs overhead a light and delicate tracery of green seemed hovering, and a few daisy stars shone whitely in the sod.

Muriel, pale and fair as a Scandinavian princess, with eyes as cold and blue as any turquoise stone, and hair of the palest gold, looked like a snow-maiden.

Only under Robert's ardent looks did a faint rose-flush ever colour those cheeks, and then it was like the after-glow kindled by sunset on the snowy peaks.

"I wish I could melt her—I wish I could waken her soul, if she has one," Robert thought, with some disappointment, as he left his betrothed that day.

He often felt the chill—the limitations of her nature; but though she were as soulless as Undine, he loved her, and spent his time in trying to warm the cold heart to life.

* * * *

"I say, Podsnap, that Italian girl's gettin' a stunner," said a languid dandy to the manager, as they looked on the stage from the side-scenes, "colour's no longer sallow, it's luminous—what Davenport would call sun-steeped. And she used to be such a skinny little beggar."

"All the difference between macaroni and beef," returned the manager, looking at Sigismunda with the eye of one who raised prize cattle. "She was starved before. Tell you what, my boys, look at those eyes—ain't they lanterns, ain't they stars. No, by Jove! They're blazing bonfires, they're fireworks, they're conflagrations!"

Sigismunda, in the dress of a Roman peasant girl, looked like the true type of the ardent tropical land from which she came.

Lithe and graceful in every movement, she seemed one blaze of colour, in her gorgeously-tinted raiment, with the strings of pink coral on the neck, the scarlet of a pomegranate blossom on cheek and lip, the blue-black gloss of her hair, and the flashing eyes, like antique jewels—dark, yet bright, appealing, tender, passionate, disdainful, scathing—blasting with a lightning-like scorn the villain in the play who approaches her with unlawful love.

Then Robert came upon the stage, and it was her *rôle* to spring forward to him with an appeal. He is her betrothed, and she cries out to him to save her, to deliver her from her persecutor, who never gives her peace from his unhallowed pursuit. It is Robert's part to shoot the villain down. He fires, and, to his horror, Sigismunda falls. By some mischance he has used a loaded revolver, and the girl had happened to receive the bullet.

She does not faint—she does not see—but she feels who it is that raises her up.

"Do not," she moans; "go away, do not look at me, I must be hideous."

For she knows by the horrible pain that her face must be drawn and distorted, and even in the agony of that moment she cannot bear that the man she loves should behold her.

"My poor child, do not think of that!" cried Robert, in an agony of terror. "I thought I had killed you. I believe I should have shot myself if I had. Look at me. Good Heavens! What is it? Can you not open your eyes?"

"She is fainting!" said a doctor, who had sprung upon the stage. "Take her out and give her air."

Once out in the green room the wound was examined. The bullet had torn its way across her face in an eccentric course and entered a pasteboard tree near.

"She will live," was the verdict, "but I fear she is horribly disfigured, and may lose the sight of one eye."

Robert Dutton dropped on his knees at the side of the girl in an agony of self-accusation.

"Save her sight, doctor!" he cried. "Send for the best assistance—spare nothing. I will be responsible."

"We will do what we can, but that pretty face is fatally marred, and I fear the worst with the eyes."

The girl was in a dead faint during this cruel verdict.

With the use of restoratives she came to her senses and moved her hands. Robert seized them

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"I am here," he whispered.

"How dark it is. Have they put all the lights out?" she said. "Oh, I remember," and she clutched Robert's hand. "But why, why can't I see? And then this burning, fiery pain, as if my very eyeballs were scorched out! Oh, tell me—tell me, I am not blind—not blind!"

"No—no," whispered Robert pitifully, "all will be well in time, but you have been hurt. You know I did that, and I am miserable. I can never be happy again unless you recover, so you must try, will you not, to be quiet and calm, and do all they say? We will have the best skill, and hope for the best."

"I will do all you ask," she said softly. "Don't grieve too much, but I hope I may not be frightful in your eyes."

* * * * * * *

For weeks after this terrible scene Robert went in vain every day to the humble lodging of the wounded girl. He never saw her. He had quite won the heart of Mrs. Bolger, the fat landlady, who had set him down at once as a distracted lover, and sympathised with him accordingly.

"Which it wrings my 'eart to see the poor lamb," she said, "as he's werry quiet, an' only moans now and then, as stands to reason, seein' her livin's gone, which she were not one as could go about with a dog a-singin' ballads like a blind man, but was that ladylike and delicate, an' wotever is to become of her?"

"I'll attend to that!" cried Robert. "But why — why won't she see me?"

"Well, it must be owned as her looks is not wot they was," Mrs. Bolger said, hesitatingly. "An' wot's beauty, arter all, when the 'eart's the right sort; but it comes 'ard, and then she can't see 'erself, and that makes it wuss and wuss."

"But the doctor said only one eye was affected."

"I believe she do 'ave a glimmer in one, an' in time that will be better."

"She must hate me!" cried Robert.

"Lord love you, it's t'other way!" cried Mrs. Bolger. "Which I do think, an' so I tells 'er as it would be better to get the first visit over."

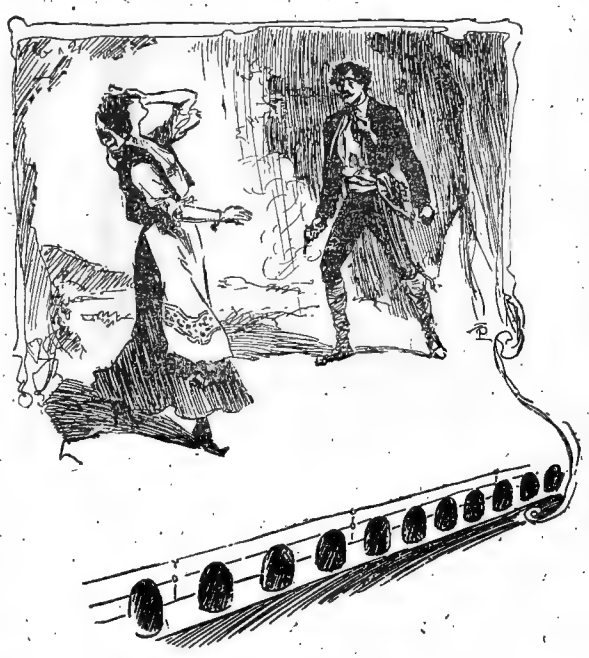
"Yes, let me see her!" exclaimed Robert. "Tell her I cannot believe she feels kindly if she shuts me out; tell her anything, so that she will see me."

Whatever little romance Mrs. Bolger may have extemporised, it proved effective, and Robert followed up the stairs, anxious, yet loth to go and look at his work.

The girl was sitting in an easy-chair by the window. It was a warm day, and she was there to catch the breeze, for she could not yet see well enough to enjoy any view. On the window-ledge stood a pot of violets that Robert had sent the day before.

The attitude of the young girl was hopeless in the extreme. She sat with her hands clasped in her lap, and her face turned away from the door. Yet she was waiting, listening, and caught the sound of the first step Robert made into the room. She did not turn even at that sound, but Robert saw that she was trembling from head to foot.

When he did catch a glimpse of that face he sprang to her side with a cry.



He had used a loaded revolver, and the girl had received the bullet in her head.

"Oh, is this my work?" he gasped. "Oh, those lovely eyes! Have I quenched their light for ever?" He had her hands in his now, and spoke on with a sudden impulse of pity and self-accusation. "Let me make what atonement I can; let me be your eyes from this time; I cannot leave you to your cruel fate! Be my wife, Sigismunda, and you shall not feel your loss."

The girl turned her white, disfigured face towards him, and reached out her hands blindly. In spite of all, the great love shone there and illuminated the marred beauty.

"Can you—do you—love me?" she faltered. "Then I thank Heaven. I am happy—I would bear more than this for your love. Oh, how weak I am! I ought to be noble and self-sacrificing, and not permit you to burden yourself with a helpless creature like myself. But I can't, Robert, I can't. It seems so heavenly that you should love me!"

The young man had not perjured himself by any vow of love, but the poor girl was too blissfully happy to notice that.

"I do not expect you to love me as I do you," she cried pressing his hands to her lips. "I am only a poor wounded little bird, glad to find shelter in your breast. But you! Oh, you are so grand, so noble——"

"There, my child!" cried Robert, with a forced laugh, turning away from the quivering face with a horrible sinking of heart as he remembered Muriel, "that is all settled, and you will get well as soon as possible. You need have no more care for the future—your future is mine." Then feeling that, some caress was called for under the circumstances, he touched her forehead with his lips. They were so cold that the girl shrank from them. "Ah," she said, "I am one of the children of the sun. You, Robert, are from the North, and you know what your poet says:

"'*The cold in clime are cold in blood,*
Their love can scarce deserve the name;
But mine is like the lava flood
That burns in Etna's breast of flame.'

"But you are so good—you are so good, my Robert. And, oh, you have proved your love by taking the poor blind girl to your heart. Do you know, I was sitting here and thinking that as soon as I could go out I would find my way to the river and end the story, for I did not dare to dream that you loved me. Now I want to live."

"Yes, yes. You must live for me!" cried Robert. "If you had drowned yourself I would have felt like a murderer. When you are quite well we will go to the seaside for a month, and see what the breezes will do. Would you like that?"

"I don't care—anywhere with you," said the girl, turning her eyes toward him. "Robert, I believe I can almost see your face. If God should give me that blessing, I would be content. Do you think it can be possible that I shall see again?"

"Yes, the sight of one eye only will be lost," answered the young man.

"But my face, is it very, *very* much disfigured?" she asked. "Mrs. Bolger puts me off. You will tell me the truth."

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And she turned towards him with a little shiver, as if she dreaded the scrutiny.

The injury had affected one side of her face, leaving the other as perfect as ever, but the effect was horrible. It was as if half of a grotesque mask had been applied—the drawn mouth, the hanging cheek, the drooping, bulging eye-lid, that half-veiled, but did not conceal the dead, staring, sightless eye.

Robert instinctively shrank away from her, but she could not see it. A vision of Muriel, his pure and peerless snow-maiden, came to him as his eyes rested on this distorted face. Ah, the atonement was very hard.

"My dear girl," he said, grasping her hand, but turning his eyes away, "you are altered, but your heart is not changed. Do not let us talk of your looks. Whatever change is there, it is my work. If you will not mourn for your lost beauty I will not."

"As you love me, it is nothing!" cried the girl, with a sigh. "And since you make me sure of that, I do not care."

And so they parted for the time.

* * * * * *

Sigismunda could see the waves as they raced up the sand—a glitter that came and went.

She had a safe nook under a rock, where, shaded from the glare, she could hear the soft plash of the water, and see the white spray dash on the beach below.

She spent hours in happy dreams, while Robert wrote his music, for he was a composer in his way.

He had been very good to her—he had soothed her tenderly when for the first time she realised the terrible change in her face, and shrank in horror from her own likeness—this strange new being that stared at her from the mirror.

"How much he must love me when it stands such a test!" the girl thought, as she idly leant back against the rock. "Oh, God, I thank Thee! Oh, I cannot think of what life would have been without him—how desolate! No, I could not bear it."

At this moment came from the rock above the sound of a girl's voice clear and high, with a tone of scorn.

"How dare you speak to me, Robert Dutton?"

"Muriel, hear me. Am I not suffering enough?"

"And all for a ridiculous, quixotic notion! Why in the world should you marry her because you shot her? I never heard of such a thing!"

"But she is helpless. She has only me."

"And I had only you."

"Oh, you have everything. Beauty, and friends, and fortune, Muriel."

"Well, you have proved to me that you never loved me."

"Loved you! Can't you see what I suffer in giving you up? Do you think I love *her*, that poor object, who can only awaken pity and horror in all who see her?"

Sigismunda felt as if sea and sky were swimming away and melting into each other. The very rock was upheaving from its base, but she clutched it and held it down.

"God knows I love you, Muriel—that it would be Heaven to me now to call you mine. But do you not see that I cannot please myself? I believe, before God, that it was the sight of your sweet face which made my hand swerve that night. You were coming in with some gentleman, and a jealous pang seized my heart. Don't you see I ought to atone to that poor girl with my life's happiness, with my heart's blood, if need be?"

"No, I don't see it. She could have gone to some institution. We might have helped her."

Sigismunda stifled a cry, and sat with her half-blind eyes staring out to sea. Ah, how near the water came! She had only to sit there long enough, and the kindly sea would sweep her out of the path of those two lovers.

"Robert"—the girl's voice grew more tender as she spoke; "I will forgive all the past. In a moment of pity you felt that you must sacrifice yourself for that girl, but now, now that you see how you are spoiling your life and mine——"

"Oh, don't tempt me—don't let me see how sweet life might be for me! Muriel, I see a vision of your sweet face whenever I look at her, but then I remember—it was my hand—I must go on in this path, though it will be like walking over burning ploughshares."

"Then I must say 'good-bye!'" returned Muriel proudly.

Sigismunda's heart had ceased to beat; it seemed as if all the wheels of life stood still, and the water was creeping up to her feet, cold as the touch of a deathly hand.

"Muriel, we may not meet again; but do not go so coldly away from me. Think what you were to me—think what you are! Let me kiss you once, dear—let me kiss you for good-bye. You are dead to me, I know, but we kiss our friends after they are dead."

There was a sudden cry as of a soul in pain, then the sound of a splash in the water near; but when the two gained the top of the rock, they could see a woman's form floating in the distance, and a mass of black hair drifting on the waves.

"God forgive me!" cried Robert, with a blanched face. "It is Sigismunda! I must try to save her or die in the attempt."

"No, no! You shall not—it is madness!" cried Muriel, clinging to his arm. "She is almost out of sight."

"She must have heard us," muttered Robert, staring after the disappearing form. "She is beyond the reach of any comfort I could give her now."

"It was the best thing she could do," exclaimed Muriel, showing conclusively that she had not yet come into possession of a soul.

But Robert clasped the girl to his heart with a glad thrill in the midst of his horror. He did not know the value of the heart that was drifting away from him, and he only felt that this treasure was his own—all his own once more.

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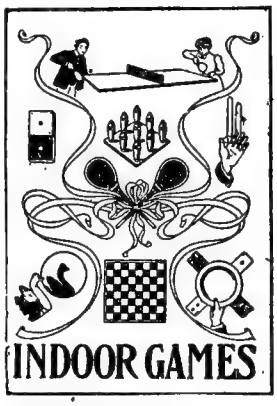

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SPLENDID NEW SERIES. **STARTS IN THIS NUMBER.**

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FIRST EPISODE.

I am Transplanted to a New Sphere.

I WAS sitting in the class-room plodding discontentedly at an Italian translation which Fräulein Wernher had imposed upon me as a punishment for having transgressed some trifling rule of the establishment which recognised her as its supreme authority. The other regular boarders had gone out, under decorous escort, to take the daily walk which had become sickeningly monotonous to me, for I had done the same dreary round for eleven melancholy years, and even if I had been blindfolded, I could have picked out every step, or window, or lamp-post between the school and the circuit of the town.

Still, even our daily constitutional was mildly exciting in comparison with doing solo penance, and after a while, feeling thoroughly miserable, I put my task aside, and yielded to the fit of weeping which had been threatening all the morning.

"Surely," I thought, "no girl was ever so friendless and forlorn as I am!"

True, the school I was at was considered the best in Bochum, my fees had always been paid punctually, and I had invariably had more pocket money than any other girl in the school. Indeed, some of my fellow-students made a point of envying me because I lacked nothing that could be required for comfort.

But they forgot that I knew none of the home joys with which they were all blessed. I had neither mother, sister, nor brother, and my only near relative, my father, had never once been to see me or expressed a desire for a glimpse of me, since he first placed me in Fräulein Wernher's care, when I was a dot of seven.

No wonder, therefore, that I was miserable. And no wonder that my misery, having at last asserted itself, had made me so oblivious of everything else that I did not become aware of another presence in the room until I was shaken vigorously by Mademoiselle Touret, the French governess, who was brimful of excitement.

"Mees Vivienne!" she exclaimed in her funny, broken English, "Mees Vivienne, you cannot guess what has happened! Something so wonderful as you never did dream!"

"Something wonderful!" I echoed dismally. "I suppose we are going to have a different kind of pudding for dinner to-day, or something equally exciting."

"Oh, no, it is not that at all. It is that you will not want puddings here no more."

"That won't matter. I never like any of them, and will be glad to escape eating them. I wish I could escape everything else here. I am just tired of my life."

With these words I burst into a fresh fit of weeping. But I soon forgot my grief, and jumped to my feet as if electrified when Mademoiselle said dramatically: "Tired of *this* life, yes. But not tired of the new and beautiful life with your father, who did send for you this day."

"My father has sent for me? Ma'mselle, you are not saying this for a joke? If I thought you were, oh, I believe I should go mad with rage!"

"Oh, what one temper you are, Mees Vivienne! I am not joke. It is a veritable fact. Meestare D'Alton has asked Fräulein to send you home at once, and she tell me to fetch you to her."

Not another word did I wait to hear! It was enough for me that Ma'mselle appeared to be thoroughly in earnest, and with a stifled cry of excitement, I rushed out of the class-room, down two flights of stairs, and, without even giving a preliminary knock, I burst into Fräulein's private sanctum.

"Is it true?" I cried. "Is it true that my father has at last sent for me?"

Before Fräulein uttered a word, I knew that the wonderful had really come to pass, and that I was to leave school life behind me for ever. At any other time the principal of the Bochumer Töchterschule would have been very indignant at my unceremonious intrusion. But now she was an odd mixture of smiles and tears, and kissed me most affectionately, by way of emphasising her tremulous remark: "At last, my dear child, the dreaded fiat has gone forth, and I must lose the pupil over whom I have watched since she was little more than a babe!"

Somewhat to my astonishment Fräulein, for the first time in my recollection, began to cry bitterly, and it suddenly dawned upon me that she must be really fond of me. The idea had never occurred to me before, for Fräulein was not demonstrative, and I had always looked upon her as the stern preceptress, who never allowed the faintest deviation from established rules. Now, however, she was all tenderness, and I actually, amid the wild joy which my approaching freedom gave me, had room to feel sorry for Fräulein because she was losing me.

"But I am glad for you," she said, as soon as she had mastered her emotion. "I had begun to fear that your father cared no longer for you. In all these years he has never once seen you, and has never invited confidence concerning you. But when I sent him the receipt for his last payment to me, I sent also one of the photographs you had taken

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recently, and he is now most anxious to see you. He said he did not guess you could be so lovely."

"He might have known what I was like if he had cared," I remarked soberly.

"Yes, that is true. And I wish he had come here to fetch you, instead of only meeting you in Rotterdam, for I would have liked to see him once more, and talk to him about you. But that cannot be, as he is unable to spare time to come all the way."

"But how am I to travel alone to Rotterdam?"

"That is all arranged. I will go with you to Ruhrort, and will see you safely on board the steamer. At the end of your short voyage your father will meet you, and then things will be well with you."

"Fräulein, I am almost afraid, after all, of what lies before me. Just think, I shall not even know my father when I see him!"

"No, Vivienne, but he will know you. He has seen your photograph, and I shall write at once to the address he has given me at Rotterdam, and describe the clothes you will wear, besides giving the name of the boat you will sail on."

This programme was duly carried out. There was a certain amount of weeping, a lavish exchange of souvenirs, a short journey to Ruhrort, an affectionate parting from Fräulein, and then, with the fever of excitement dancing in my veins, I was sailing down the Rhine, to meet the father who was a complete stranger to me.

Under other conditions, I suppose, I should have taken a vast interest in my surroundings. And the scenery, though not so attractive as it is higher up the river, would have afforded a certain amount of delight to me, if my thoughts had not been centred in the meeting which was so near at hand. But not all the lack of parental affection which I had endured for so many years was enough to quench my eager desire to show my filial love; I could think of nothing but my father, and I mentally compared him with every man I saw.

The faint recollection I had of him was that of a tall, handsome man, with a fresh-coloured face, and kind, grey eyes, and this recollection was borne out by Fräulein Wernher's more mature memory. He was young, too, and as he could not be more than fifty even now, I pictured him as more attractive than ever.

Concerning the house in which I was to live in future I had but the most hazy of notions. While I was at school my father seemed to have spent his time in travelling all over Europe, without any fixed abode, and his remittances to Fräulein Wernher arrived from all sorts of places. But he intimated in his last communication that he meant to settle in a splendid establishment in London almost immediately, and that I was to act as his housekeeper.

"A splendid establishment" implies a staff of servants, and while I was smartening myself up a little, just before the steamer reached Rotterdam, I wondered if a lady's maid was to be included in the personal blessings in store for me.

Presently it became apparent that we had reached our destination and I rushed eagerly on deck that I might see my father as soon as possible. Hastily casting my eyes upon the throng of people who were waiting to come aboard as soon as the vessel was moored, I tried to recognise the one man in the world who possessed any interest for me.

A tall, handsome gentleman pressed eagerly in my direction, and my heart thrilled with pride and joy at sight of him. But alas! he looked past me to a lady who occupied the next berth to mine in coming down the river, and I was bitterly disappointed that he ignored me altogether.

But a worse disappointment was in store for me. I was glancing anxiously ahead when a sharp, incisive, but not unmelodious, voice accosted me with the words:

"I think there can be no mistake. You are Miss D'Alton?"

The speaker was a short, stout, sallow-faced man, at sight of whom my pride and joy sank to zero. I believe my disillusionment showed itself in my face for an instant. Then it occurred to me that this might not necessarily be my father himself, but someone whom he had sent to meet me, and I beamed smiles upon him.

"Yes," I said, "I am Vivienne D'Alton. I expected my father himself to be here. I am all impatience to see him, so I hope you will take me to him at once."

"What would you say if I were to pose as your father himself?"

"That you were having a little fun with me, because you happen to know that my father and I are practically strangers."

"My dear Vivienne, that is exactly what I expected you to say, for I've altered frightfully. When a man takes to adding superfluous flesh like I've done, even his own mother would look in vain for his former good looks."

"And you are Beverley D'Alton?"

"The very same, my dear, and very proud I am to be your father. But come along, child. I have a carriage waiting to take us to the house of a friend of mine who awaits your advent most anxiously."

That was all. There was no loving embrace for me. Not even a fatherly kiss of welcome. Just a stiff handshake such as might be bestowed upon the veriest stranger, and I felt more horribly depressed than I could have imagined possible.

Yet there was nothing tangible for me to complain of. My father's manners were those of a perfect gentleman, and he showed the utmost desire to insure my comfort in every way. He even insisted upon carrying my waterproof and umbrella to the carriage, and I noticed that the porter who disposed of my luggage upon a cab smiled delightedly at the heavy tip which was given him.

In fact, everything looked correct to the casual observer, and the studied deference which was paid to my comfort was gradually instrumental in making me see things in a somewhat different light. Of course, it was not my father's fault that Time had played such havoc with his good looks, and I reproached myself for having let it influence me at all.

After driving about twenty minutes we arrived at a large mansion, where I was enthusiastically welcomed by a Mrs. Sherwood, who was introduced to me as "my aunt."

"You sweet child!" she exclaimed. "Beverley and I thought you must be lovely when we saw your photograph, but you are infinitely prettier than we imagined. You will be immensely popular when you go to London."

Several kisses accompanied this eulogium, and I tried to be pleased with Mrs. Sherwood's welcome, but could not resist saying: "I hope looks are not supposed to be the only passport to popularity?"

"If they were," put in my father with a laugh, "I shouldn't stand much chance, eh?"

I blushed guiltily at this gentle reproof, and felt sorry that I had allowed my disappointment to be seen so plainly.

But Mrs. Sherwood saved me from further embarrassment by observing gaily:

"Thank goodness, the world nowadays knows how to appreciate people for mental and moral qualities. So women like me, who are painfully *passée*, need not worry because the Goddess of Beauty forgot to leave a permanent impression on them. But there, how forgetful I am! My dear Vivienne, you must be famished! Come with me, and I will show you the room you are to occupy while you remain here. Then, when you have taken your hat off, you shall have your lunch."

"Thank you, Mrs. Sherwood. I really think I am very hungry."

"Not *Mrs. Sherwood*. That sounds so distant. Why not call me 'Aunt Flora'?"

"With pleasure. But, do you know, I have never known that I had an Aunt Flora."

"Well, I'm not really your aunt. But your darling mother and I were just like sisters, and she would have loved me to watch over your welfare. Unfortunately, I did not know where you were until I met your father two months ago, or I should certainly have sought you out."

Part of this conversation took place as we were going upstairs, and I no sooner reached the room allotted to me than I impulsively kissed my new "aunt," for the dearest friend of my dead mother must naturally win my affection.

Left to myself by and bye, I hurried through my toilet, and,

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having barely glanced at my dainty surroundings, I ran softly downstairs to join my father and "Aunt Flora" in the dining-room. Half way down, opposite the top of the first landing, there was a pretty sitting-room, as I could easily see, for the door was partly open. I was tempted to peep in, but drew back when I heard my father ask somebody who, like myself, was hidden by the half open door:

"And you think she will swallow all that?"

"Absolutely!" was the reply in "Aunt Flora's" voice. "She is so deliciously inexperienced, and as gullible as a dove. Trust me to manage her all right."

The conversation struck a chill through me, for I was bound to connect it with myself, and I instantly wondered what sinister object could underlie Mrs. Sherwood's affectionate manner towards me. But eavesdropping is not exactly in my line, so I walked straight into the room, saying defiantly: "And in what way is my gullibility to be taken advantage of?"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed "Aunt Flora," "you surely don't connect our conversation with yourself?"

The surprise I witnessed was nothing like consternation, such as might be expected on the part of persons overheard talking of the discomfiture of the listener. On the contrary, it savoured more of amusement than anything else, and this amusement broadened into laughter when I tried to justify my apparently erroneous supposition.

"I certainly thought you meant me," I said shamefacedly.

I was tempted to peep in, but drew back when I heard someone remark; "And you think she will swallow all that?"

"What else could I think when you spoke of somebody's 'delicious inexperience'?"

"My dear child, when you have had servants under your control for a while, you will quite understand my present difficulty. I have a cook who came to me with splendid credentials, evidently given to her by people who were glad to get rid of her services as cook, just as I shall be. She knows absolutely nothing about cookery, but I fancy she can be converted into a first-class lady's maid for you. So I am going to ask her to resign the presidency of the kitchen in favour of a better cook. But, to avoid unpleasantness, I shall tell her that she is to be 'promoted' because she is in every way satisfactory."

"But why should she be unpleasant about such an improvement in her position?"

"Because she has better wages as a cook than she will get as a lady's maid, and it will require a little *finesse* on my part to make her fall in with my views."

Once more I felt myself painfully in the wrong, and the uncomfortable feeling of culpability was intensified when my father added gravely: "I am sorry to observe, Vivienne, that Fräulein Wernher has neglected to teach you that listening at doors is unladylike, and that a suspicious temperament is a never failing curse to its possessor."

"Beverley! How can you be so unkind! I'm sure she did not mean to listen, and still more sure that she is no more suspicious by nature than the rest of her dear mother's relations always were."

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With these words my affectionate aunt put her arms round me and folded me in a motherly embrace.

And I ?

Well, I believed her to be the kind creature she professed to be, and I murmured broken regrets at being a source of disappointment to my father, who now displayed his parental love by kissing my cheek the while he enjoined me to forget what had been said and to think of nothing but being as happy as possible.

I did my best to obey the injunction, and soon became quite happy in the conviction that I was the central object of the love of a good, kind father and an aunt who desired nothing greater than to make me like her as much as my long-lost mother did.

Poor Vivienne ! If you had but heeded your first instinctive impulses you would have saved yourself and others an infinity of suffering at the hands of two of the most pitiless schemers who ever plotted the ruin of their fellow creatures !

* * * * *

Three days passed over, and I was thoroughly happy. Aunt Flora took me to all the best shops in Rotterdam, and bought me so many pretty things that I began to exclaim at the amount of money spent upon me.

" My darling Vivienne," was the smiling rejoinder, " what you are getting now is nothing to what is in store for you. You must not forget that your father is now a very rich man, and that he is so proud of you and so pleased with you that he does not care what is spent so long as you are happy.

" And he wants you to go to London, looking already as if the enjoyment of unlimited wealth was second nature to you. That is why he has left you with me while he goes to superintend the furnishing of his house in Park Lane. It is to be the most gorgeous residence in London, and Beverley wants his lovely daughter to be the queen of the coming season."

It was pleasant at first to hear myself spoken of as a beauty. But the flattery was becoming stale now, and I was by no means so sure of conquest as my affectionate relatives seemed to be, for I had often read that London contained thousands of beautiful women, and could not see why the addition of one more should make a great sensation.

However, I was not obstinate enough to argue the point, but yielded myself unreservedly to the delights of the present. The only mitigating drop in my cup of happiness was Annchen, my new lady's maid, promoted, so I was told, from the kitchen. Annchen was certainly not expert in her duties as yet. But she was a willing worker, and was anxious to improve herself, so I supposed she would be an accomplished maid in course of time.

But I could not bring myself to like having her about me. She struck me as being a prying, inquisitive person, who gathered up every crumb of information concerning everybody with whom she came in contact, but whose lips were firmly sealed about her own affairs. In fact, she gave me a creepy kind of feeling, and was everlastingly on my nerves. But she afforded me no real cause to complain of her, and as Aunt Flora was always singing her praises, it followed that the fault must be with me, and not with Annchen.

One thing struck me as rather odd. Mrs. Sherwood, who owned that she was not a blood relation of ours, and that she and my father had not seen each other for a great number of years until lately, always spoke of him by his Christian name, and I noticed that he reciprocated the familiarity by calling her " Flora."

It seemed, however, to be pushing intimate friendliness too far when I heard her observe to Annchen :

" I had a letter from Beverley this morning. He says the pigeon will be here in an hour or two."

I had gone to Aunt Flora's dressing-room, to show her a letter I had just received from Fräulein Wernher, in which I was given much interesting news about the schoolmates whom I left behind. Finding myself alone, I was waiting till my aunt appeared from the adjoining bedroom, and was very much astonished when I heard Annchen reply :

" Then we will pluck him very soon. Kaspar is quite ready."

" Auntie, may I come in ? " I called out, and I fancied there was a smothered exclamation when my near presence was thus made known.

" Is that you, dear ? " was the almost instant rejoinder. " By all means come in."

Then as I entered Aunt Flora turned a whimsically smiling face to me, and continued :

" What do you think, Vivienne, of your father's latest experiment ? He has recently tasted some pigeons cooked after a queer Dutch fashion in white wine, and he wants his London *chef* to know what they are like. So he is sending an order to a poulterer near Rotterdam to supply Kaspar Krause, who has the secret of the cooking, with a pigeon each day.

" This has to be got ready to send over by next morning's boat, and the supply has to be kept up daily until the London *chef* has guessed the recipe which Kaspar guards so carefully."

" And I have to see to the plucking before the pigeons are sent to Kaspar," added Annchen.

The explanation sounded plausible enough, though I was inclined to think the whole proceeding rather silly. But, of course, a man who was as wealthy as my father could afford to indulge in the most extravagant gastronomic tastes, and how was I to guess that the secret spoken of was of so terrible and so ghastly a nature that the consequences of it will haunt me to my dying day ?

" By-the-bye," remarked Aunt Flora, about three hours later, " there is a gentleman calling to-day with a letter of introduction from your father. I think he has business of some sort in Rotterdam, and Beverley asks me to be hospitable to him while he is here. Of course we must invite him to dine with us, though I don't suppose he is very interesting. People who come with letters of introduction seldom are.'

As I had never encountered anybody bearing a letter of introduction, I was not in a position to contradict this statement until the gentleman now being discussed put in an appearance, when I emphatically told myself that he was exceedingly nice.

He was a Mr. Graysworthy, a man about thirty-five years of age, of irreproachable manners and pleasant conversation. There was something about him which seemed to win confidence at once, and he readily accepted Aunt Flora's invitation to dine with us.

His special business in Holland, it appeared, was to sell some wonderful diamonds with which he had recently returned from South Africa, and if the merchants in Rotterdam fought shy of them, he meant to go on to Amsterdam, in the hope of finding somebody wealthy enough to pay the enormous sum the diamonds were worth.

" And you carry such a huge fortune about with you ? " inquired Aunt Flora. " I wonder you are not afraid of being robbed or murdered ! Some people would do anything to secure such a fortune at one swoop."

" I daresay they would," was the confident reply. " But I do not advertise my possessions to the casual onlooker. I do not even display a watch-chain or a tie pin, and nobody but those in the secret could guess that the belt I wear round my waist is worth fifty thousand pounds at the very least."

" Fifty thousand pounds ! " I echoed. " What an enormous fortune ! "

" My dear Vivienne," was Aunt Flora's smiling comment, " You have no real conception of what a big fortune is. Compared with what your father has, fifty thousand pounds is but a small sum."

" How strange it seems ! Aunt Flora, has he always been as rich as that ? "

" Oh, no ! It is only within the last few years that he has become enormously wealthy, since he took a number of shares in some South African diamond mines."

" And it is precisely because Mr. D'Alton has been so successful in his diamond dealing that I was recommended to ask his advice," supplemented Mr. Graysworthy.

I felt glad that this pleasant, gentlemanly visitor had sought and found kindness at my father's hands, and as the serving of dinner made it inadvisable to continue talking about the whereabouts of valuable diamonds, we changed the subject, our conversation ranging through such a variety of interesting

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topics that when the evening was at last over I felt sorry to think that Mr. Graysworthy would perhaps soon pass out of my life altogether.

Could I but have guessed at the tragic sequel to that most delightful evening, I should have been filled with horror. As it was, I enjoyed myself wonderfully, and was more than pleased when our guest, just before bidding me "Good-night," expressed the hope that he might see a great deal of me in future.

"I shall probably leave Rotterdam on Friday or the next day, according to the exigencies of business," he continued. "But I am looking forward to meeting you constantly in London."

"I believe I am to go to our new house next week," I smiled. "So you must be sure to look us up very soon."

"And in the meantime," added Aunt Flora, "we don't want to lose sight of you here. What do you propose to do with yourself to-morrow evening?"

"I have no particular engagement, and am sure to be free, for the diamond merchants will not be doing business after nightfall, I suppose."

"Well, I am sorry I cannot ask you to dine here with us, as I have promised that Vivienne shall visit some very old friends of mine, and I have fixed to-morrow for the visit."

This was the first I had heard of the arrangement just mentioned, and when I saw how disappointed Mr. Graysworthy looked, I felt that I could easily forego visiting Aunt Flora's friends.

"But that need not deprive us of your company," continued my smiling chaperon. "Herr and Madame Althaus are the nicest people in the world, and I am sure they will be delighted if you will join us at their house in time for dinner."

Mr. Graysworthy gladly fell in with this scheme, and promised to join us at seven o'clock at the residence of Herr Althaus. It did not occur to me that he had not got the address until I saw Aunt Flora write something on a card, which she handed to him.

"Here are explicit directions for finding the place," she observed. "So you will have no excuse for losing your way, and we shall expect you very anxiously."

Mr. Graysworthy took the card, read it carefully, and put it into his pocket-book. Then, with a happy smile and a warm hand pressure, accompanied by an ardent look of admiration when speaking to me, he bade us "Good-night."

And that is the last I ever saw of Gilbert Graysworthy.

* * * * * * *

During the following morning I heard a great deal of the Althaus family. It seemed that all the children were married and living elsewhere, and that both Herr and Madame Althaus were never so happy as when they had young people around them.

"You will enjoy yourself immensely," said Aunt Flora. "And Mr. Graysworthy will help to make the evening still pleasanter for you."

He bade me good-night—and that is the last I ever saw of Gilbert Graysworthy!

Of the truth of the last assertion I had no doubt, and it was a very happy girl who stepped into the carriage which was to convey us to our destination.

"You look fresher than ever," commented Aunt Flora. "But don't be rash, my dear. Mr. Graysworthy admires you immensely, and he is certainly not a bad *parti*. But your father has much greater ambition than that for you. He thinks you ought to marry nothing short of an earl. Besides, you have seen no men hardly yet, and must not lose your heart to the first comer."

This advice was no doubt well meant. But it jarred exceedingly, and I was conscious that my face put on a mutinous

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expression which warns Aunt Flora not to be too obtrusive with her worldly counsels.

Our drive was a very long one. But it ended at last, and we arrived at a big, lonely, dingy house, of which I did not like the outside look at all. Nor do I find the interior much more to my taste, and I actually looked with dismay at the commonplace, unwieldy, unprepossessing couple who proved to be Aunt Flora's much-vaunted friends, Herr and Madame Althaus.

If it were not that Mr. Graysworthy was expected to be here in the evening I should have felt tempted to feign a headache or some other flimsy excuse to go home again, and as the dreary afternoon wore itself away, I began to think that even prospective gay companionship was hardly worth the waste of time involved in spending a whole afternoon with the Althaus couple.

We had coffee and the others also had cakes. My aunt talked a great deal. Our hosts talked very little, and I talked still less. By way of breaking the monotony Aunt Flora asked me to play "some of my pieces" on the old piano, which was horribly out of tune, and I obeyed with alacrity, for if I could sit at the piano I should be exempt from listening to the intermittent, twaddly conversation of the most uninteresting couple it is possible to conceive. However Aunt Flora could regard them with comparative affection was more than I could understand, but that was probably because I was still young enough, and buoyant enough, to feel that reciprocal youth and bouyancy were necessary for my well-being.

I played on till seven o'clock without paying any further attention to my surroundings. But after a surreptitious glance at my watch had shown me that it was now time for Mr. Graysworthy to have arrived, I was all ears for the slightest noise at the front door.

But something must have detained him most unaccountably for more than another hour wore away without interruption. My fingers were tired of strumming the keys of the piano, and I was conscious of feeling more than ready for the dinner which was to have been served at seven precisely.

Madame Althaus had wandered in and out of the room several times, and Mynheer disappeared through the doorway just as I turned round from the piano, leaving Aunt Flora and myself alone for a moment.

"I'm awfully hungry," I said querulously. "I wish we had stayed at home instead of coming to a humdrum hole like this!"

"Vivienne!" reproved Aunt Flora. "I'm surprised at you!"

"And I'm surprised at you!" I retorted, rising and walking across the room. "You spoke of Herr Althaus and his madame as if they were somebody I should be delighted with. And they are simply the most uninteresting old bores in existence! I wonder why they can't give us our dinner?"

"They are waiting for Mr. Graysworthy, who is behaving very badly in being so unpunctual."

I looked into an old mirror which hung over a dilapidated dwarf china cabinet, and saw such a discontented face that I felt it my duty to straighten it a little. Then I said:

"I suppose something has detained him. But that is not sufficient reason for keeping us without dinner till this time."

"Vivienne, you are very unreasonable."

"Who can be reasonable when dealing with such stupid people?"

"We will have dinner now, Mees D'Alton."

I started with confusion when I heard these words, for they were spoken in the oily, unpleasant voice of Madame Althaus, who had entered the room again without my hearing her.

"I am sorry to keep the young mees so long without her dinner," she added, striving to look benevolent, though her beady eyes flashed a malicious glance at me. "But it is the English mynheer who is to blame, and I am afraid the dinner is now spoiled by being kept waiting."

I was apologising for my own rudeness when I heard a noise outside which I instantly recognised at the "churr" of a nightjar, and I ran to one of the windows in excitement.

"What an odd thing for a nightjar to be churring already!" I exclaimed. "I thought they did not come out till quite dark."

"Vivienne, come here this minute! You must not disturb Madame's curtains by pulling them aside!"

It was Aunt Flora who spoke thus dictatorily to me. And, incredible though it seemed, there was a note of terror in her voice. Greatly wondering at the consternation I had apparently caused, I wrenched myself loose, and demanded to know what harm there could be in trying to see the nightbird which was jarring outside.

"There is no harm, Mees D'Alton," Madame assured me. "But I do not like my blinds pulled aside, and Madame Sherwood knows that it is so."

"I will take care to touch nothing of yours, Madame," I responded angrily. "One would think I were a mischievous baby. Aunt Flora, kindly excuse us to Madame. I am going back home."

"Not without your dinner," invited Madame Althaus, who was shaking as if she were frightened to death over something or other.

But I was not inclined to accept further hospitality at her hands, and as I was angry with Aunt Flora too, I was firm in my determination to go home as soon as the carriage could be brought out again.

"Very well," said my aunt, "I suppose you must please yourself. But if I had known what kind of girl your father was asking me to chaperon, I should have thought twice about it."

To this remark I made no reply, and during the drive back into Rotterdam we were both very reticent. I was spared the embarrassment of bidding "Good-evening" to the unctuous couple who inspired me with such unconquerable dislike, for Madame waddled out of the room when I refused to stay to dinner, and neither she nor her husband showed themselves to me again.

Although I said little, I was thinking a good deal, for I was feeling extremely puzzled. I wondered why both Aunt Flora and Madame Althaus should have been so afraid to let me look through the window. They were too late to prevent me from seeing that my maid, Annchen, was standing outside, with a big, rough-looking man, who had his fingers to his mouth, as if he were using them to regulate some sound he was making, and I couldn't help wondering what the girl could be doing there.

However, I did not tell Aunt Flora that I had seen my maid, and that I knew the "nightjar" to be the latter's uncouth companion, for I had an idea that some kind of trickery was afloat, and I resented having been induced to waste the greater part of a day under such uncongenial circumstances.

Being young and healthy, I did full justice to my supper, and slept well enough, too. But a great shock awaited me when Aunt Flora and I were having breakfast next morning. I was reading a most affectionate letter, just received from my father, when the English girl who acted as waiting-maid entered with a freshly-buttered hot roll, and burt into tears.

We both looked at her in astonishment. But my astonishment turned to horror when she sobbed forth: "Oh, Madame, I cannot help it. It is so terrible! They have found another dead body lying in the Messiner Straat. He has been murdered, stabbed through the heart. But he has not been robbed, for his money was in his pockets, and his watch and ring still on when he was found. And his name was on his cards and pocketbook."

"Yes, that is very dreadful," commented Aunt Flora, whose voice quavered with strong emotion of some sort. "But why should *you* take the affair so much to heart?"

"Because," sobbed the maid. "I saw the gentleman looking well and happy only two nights since."

"Two nights since?" I almost shrieked, for a horrible foreboding had seized me. "Where could you have seen him?"

"I saw him here, Miss Vivienne. The body is that of a tall, handsome Englishman, and his name is Mr. Gilbert Graysworthy."

(Another instalment of this exciting series next week.)

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Pamela Gordon's Escapade.

How a Girl Outwitted her Mean Father.

THE Gordons were, or considered themselves, the very first people in Ramtown, and Josiah Gordon, the present head of the family, was very proud of his ancestors. He was about the meanest man in money matters ever known. He had driven his boys from home by his niggardliness; and now that his wife was dead, his daughter Pamela was all that he had left.

She was a handsome, strong, well-made girl, and intellectual, although he had given her the very poorest education, and no accomplishments whatever. She worked in his house without help, or thanks, or reward of any kind; her only consolation being that she *was* Miss Gordon.

"Much good that does me," she used to say, as she toiled away to save her rich father a few more pounds.

Girls who had no grandfathers to boast about had accomplishments and good clothes, and comforts and pleasures of all sorts, which she never knew, and which her father could well afford.

At last, on her nineteenth birthday, after she had longed in silence for many days, Pamela grew bold. Long, fur-lined cloaks were just coming into fashion, and how she wanted one only a girl can know.

It was while her father sat counting over a great roll of notes, which he had just received as the rent of certain property, that she went softly behind him, and said, meekly:

"Dad, can I have one of those large, black silk cloaks, such as Patsy Burroughs wears—one with a fur lining? I'll make it myself. It will wear for years. Oh, dad, I do so want it!" and she paused, with hands unconsciously clasped together.

Mr. Gordon looked at her horror-stricken.

"A *silk* cloak, with a fur lining!" he repeated, slowly. "No, you can't, Pamela; it's too expensive. Get your poor mother's grey cloak and wear that out. I'm sure she'd be willing."

"Poor mother's shawl had moths in it two years before she died," sighed Pamela. "She couldn't wear it, and you never knew, dad; you don't know how badly off I am. I've outgrown my jacket, and look quite a sight in it. I have boy's shoes, and a hat—oh, dear, such a hat! I cannot really go out anywhere."

"Women should stay at home," said Mr. Gordon.

"Certainly I ought to go to church," said Pamela.

"Not to show fine clothes," said Mr. Gordon.

"But I ought to dress like a lady," sighed the poor girl. "I should think you'd admit that, dad?"

"*Ladies* are not always the best dressed," said Mr. Gordon. "Far from it. You are Miss Gordon. Remember, the Gordons are the oldest family in Ramtown."

"Oh, I know all that, dad," interrupted Pamela; "but it does no good, if I must go about looking like a beggar."

Mr. Gordon brought down his cane on the floor, thundered out, "Hold your tongue, Pamela," buttoned his pocket-book into his bosom and trotted away to deposit the money, while Pamela, scarlet from brow to chin, remained where he had left her.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she exclaimed at last. "Is this a woman's fate, to beg all the days of her life? I have no education. I cannot teach. I can do nothing but housework. I'm the best washer in the village, but—There!" cried Pamela, bringing her foot down on the floor suddenly. "There! I've got it. A girl who can wash and iron as I can doesn't need to beg for her clothes."

Brushing her tears away she ran into the hall, took from a peg her shabby jacket and hat, put them on, locked up the house, and hurried down the village street as fast as her strong young limbs could carry her, until she stopped at a little white house, at the low window of which she tapped.

A little girl opened the door, and Pamela followed her into a sitting-room, where a thin woman sat, amidst cushions, in a big rocking-chair, with a brand new baby across her knee, two older ones on the floor near her, and two little boys building a model on the table, while the little girl who had opened the door made the sixth of the youthful group.

"Why, Miss Pamela" said the mother, "how pleased I am to see you! Excuse my getting up. I'm not strong yet. I was thinking when you came in whether or no I should be able to darn that place in the carpet, but I don't feel I shall. Nurse has gone away, and sister can't come because her husband is down with fever, and I'm awfully unsettled."

"You must be," said Pamela, fondling the baby. "Why, what a little beauty it is, Mrs. Pease. I suppose you've got a washerwoman this week?"

"No, I haven't. It's my worst trouble," said Mrs. Pease. "I had Kitty bring the things, and they are all mended and sorted out; but Barbara is engaged up on the hill, and I don't know what I'll do."

"Hire *me*," said Pamela.

"What?" laughed Mrs. Pease. "Why, Miss Gordon!"

"I mean it," said Pamela. "I wash better than Barbara, and I want to earn some money. You can pay me what you pay her, Mrs. Pease."

"Three shillings a day," said Mrs. Pease; "but, gracious, Miss Pamela, you *can't* mean it?"

"I mean it from my heart," said Pamela. "Dad thinks

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more of his money than he does of me. I'm going to earn clothes for myself. I need them, I'm sure."

"Men are *so* peculiar sometimes," sighed Mrs. Pease. "If you really mean it, it will be a great comfort to me."

Pamela instantly took off her hat and jacket, tucked up her skirt, and took Kitty out into the kitchen with her.

Before night "the washing," white as snow, was piled in a great clothes basket. Mrs. Pease had had a good bowl of soup, and all was tidy in the little sitting-room where Pamela sat mending the bit of carpet.

"I knew it would bother you until it was done," she said, "and now I'll go home and get dad's tea."

"Oh, Miss Pamela, I'm so much obliged," said Mrs. Pease, "and I believe you've only done it to oblige me."

"No," said Pamela, "I did it to earn money. May I come next Monday?"

"Why, gracious me! If you *will*," said Mrs. Pease.

"Been to see Mrs. Pease?" asked curious Mrs. Chalker peeping out of her kitchen door as Pamela passed.

"I've been washing for her," said Pamela.

"Why, how very kind of you, to be sure," said Mrs. Chalker.

"Nothing of the sort," said Pamela. "I took my money for it. Have you your washerwoman, Mrs. Chalker?"

"No, I haven't, and I'm not able to wash," said Mrs. Chalker.

Pamela instantly offered her services.

"I am going to go out washing," she said. "I'm going to do it, just as other washerwomen do, for money. I shan't explain why. But here I am, a splendid laundress, ready to be hired six days in the week, from seven to six, if any one wants me."

So it began. Before long Pamela had many employers, and the village was rife with supposition as to the why and wherefore; but never was girl prouder of herself than was Pamela when she laid down upon the counter of a draper's the money for the silk and fur of her coveted cloak; hard-earned money, but all her very own, not a penny of it coaxed out of any unwilling man alive.

She wore the cloak and a pretty plush bonnet and new kid gloves to church on Christmas Day. She looked well. The squire stared at her solemnly, but he knew she had had no money.

"I expect," he thought, "she's cut up her poor mother's old black silk. I won't ask any questions," and he held his peace.

Pamela, as she looked at him, wondered what he would say if he knew all. That week she had had some cards printed—professional cards.

The printer brought them home next morning. They read thus:

"MISS PAMELA GORDON—Laundrywork or House-cleaning done in the best manner. GORDON HOUSE, —— ——."

The cards were circulated through the village by a boy hired for the purpose, and on her return at night from her day's work, Pamela found a post-card awaiting her.

"MISS GORDON, Laundress—*Please call at Mr. Bothwell's early to-morrow.* "G. BOTHWELL."

Now Mr. Bothwell was the new minister, a widower, with two children. He knew nothing of the Gordons, or of the village as yet. He had preached there once, and had been "called" in consequence, on the demise of the excellent Mr. Dolorous, who had departed this life at a ripe old age. Pamela laughed a little as she determined to call and see what was desired. At seven o'clock she rang the bell of the pastor's very small house, and was answered by the gentleman himself. He was in evident distress of mind, and his dressing-gown needed mending sadly.

He looked at Miss Gordon for a moment, and then requested her to walk into his study. It was a dusty place, with a good deal of manuscript lying about; and the shrieks of weeping children were heard in the distance.

"May I ask what I can do for you, miss?" inquired the gentleman, motioning to a seat.

"You wrote to me," said Pamela. "Miss Gordon, laundress."

"Oh, dear me, yes," replied Mr. Bothwell, with wide open eyes, "I wrote to you. Thanks for your promptness. The fact of the matter is, my housekeeper—an aged person—I thought her most estimable—is lying terribly intoxicated on the kitchen floor, and has been for two days, and things are—are——"

And Mr. Bothwell, running short of words, spread his hands out in a pantomime descriptive of chaos.

"I understand," said Pamela calmly. "Where is your kitchen?"

Two hours afterwards the master was calmly writing in his study, and the children, washed and dressed, were listening to the stories Pamela told them as she rubbed away at the wash-board.

The housekeeper had been dumped upon a bed in a small bedroom on the lower floor to sleep off her intoxication, and potatoes were boiling and a couple of chickens roasting for the family dinner.

Meanwhile Mr. Gordon, having some important documents to inspect, had come home unexpectedly, and entering the house, had found it empty, and in the sitting-room came upon a sight which petrified him with horror.

A little portable desk, which his daughter had appropriated for her own, lying open on the table, and in it the cards we have described, and her account-book.

He read the cards first:

"MISS PAMELA GORDON—Laundrywork or House-cleaning done in the best manner."

Then he ran his eye over the account-book.

"Washed—Monday for Mrs. Pease; Tuesday for Mrs. Chalker; Wednesday for Mrs. Mott; iron, Thursday afternoon; house-cleaning for Mrs. Down on Saturday."

He read this in a furious rage, and almost foaming at the mouth, until he came to the following items:

"Dec. 5th.—Bought silk and fur for cloak.

"Dec. 10th.—Made cloak. It fits well.

"Dec. 25th.—Wore the cloak to church, and thanked heaven I hadn't to beg it from father."

Then Mr. Gordon closed the book, and with a queer disposition to cry, sat down beside his solitary hearth, and looked at the fire for several hours without stirring.

When Pamela opened the door and came in she saw her father, and knew that he knew all.

"Pamela, come here," he said. "How long has this been going on?"

"Since October, dad," the girl answered.

"Then you've been disgracing me and yourself for three months," said the old man. "*You*, a Gordon! And all to spite your poor old father for being careful of his money."

Pamela was not afraid of her father now. She came over and sat beside him.

"Dad," she said, "it was not for spite; it was for want; I suffered so much mortification, not only from being shabby, but having to beg. If there is anything in good blood, as you think there is, perhaps that made it hard for me to beg even from you. I was happier earning what I needed. Would you like to be a beggar, dad?"

"You've done very wrong, Pamela," said her father. Then he paused and added: "You shall tell me what allowance you need for your clothes, and I'll let you have it monthly. Now, give me those cards."

He burnt them in the fire when she had handed them to him, and she hurried away to get his tea, and no more was said. The Gordons were not great talkers.

But Pamela is not sorry for what she did to this day.

As for Mr. Bothwell, he rejoices; for otherwise, perhaps, he might, being a shy man, never have met Pamela Gordon, who is to marry him before long. Other people may blame her for her "escapade," or call her "odd" or "spiteful"; he understands her and admires her all the more for her independence.

"Though, Pamela," he often says, "I should have offered myself all the same had you actually been a laundress."

Maud Vickers.

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The Reason Why.

"I'll never ask another woman to marry me so long as I live." "Refused?" "No; accepted."

A Sure Sign.

CARRIE: "Are you sure that May and Algy are engaged?" Amy: "Why, certainly! I heard them quarrelling last night."

Something Fatal.

"She had the fatal gift of beauty, had she not?" "Well, I don't know whether it was her beauty or her money that was fatal, but anyhow she married a titled nonentity."

A Hint Accepted.

"MAY I kiss you, Miss Jane?" "I am sorry to see, Mr. Briggs, that you, too, are affected by the prevailing cause of business depression." "And that is?" "Lack of confidence." Then he kissed her.

Not Very Complimentary.

HE: "My people are bothering me to marry Miss Mayford." She: "You'd be lucky if you did. She is very clever and very beautiful——" He: "Oh, I don't want to marry brains and beauty. I want to marry you."

Pa was Sorry for Him.

SHE (anxiously): "Have you asked papa, Reginald?" He: "Yes." She (nervously): "What did he say?" He: "He didn't say anything; but I know he gave his consent, for he looked at me in a pitying sort of way, don't you know."

Naturally She Wouldn't.

GERTIE: "I want your advice. I've been proposed to by three men, and I don't know which one to choose." Mabel: "Do you know which has the most money?" Gertie: "Of course I don't, you silly! I shouldn't want anybody's advice if I knew that!"

How Ungrateful!

HE: "I am really surprised at Dr. White. After being our family doctor for years, and treating me for all sorts of things, and to think of all the money we've paid him, too!" She: "What has he done?" He: "He wouldn't pass me for the life insurance company."

A Most Awkward Allusion.

GEORGE: "Do you know what I am going to give you for a birthday present this year?" Maud (enthusiastically): "No; only I'm sure it will be something new, and stylish, and elegant, and awfully expensive. You dear, reckless boy, you!" And George wishes he had not said anything.

Circumstances Alter Cases.

THEY were standing at the front gate. "Won't you come into the parlour and sit for a little while, George?" "N-no, I think not," replied George hesitatingly. "I wish you would," the girl went on; "it's awfully lonely. Mother has gone out, and father is upstairs groaning with rheumatism in the legs." "Both legs?" asked George. "Yes; both legs." "Then I'll come in for a little while."

Not a Paradox.

SHE: "There is a woman whom I envy. And, curious as it may seem, she envies me." He: "How can can that be?" She: "We were both after the same man—and I married him."

It Always Happens Thus.

TED: "I've been trying to catch Dolly under the mistletoe, but Miss Autumn seems to be the only one I can find there." Ned: "It seems to be an instance of the wrong girl in the right place."

A Slight Misapprehension.

ARTIST: "What do you think of my peasant girl?" Young Miss: "I think her hat is perfectly charming. Is she going to the theatre?" Artist (despondently): "That's not a hat. She's carrying hay."

A Slip of the Tongue.

HE (pleadingly): "Why can't we be married at once?" She (coyly): "Oh, I can't bear to leave father alone just now." He (earnestly): "But, my darling, he has had you such a long time." She (freezingly): "Sir!"

Tit for Tat.

ETHEL: "Mr. Fiddleback wanted to send you a birthday present, but I told him you have stopped having birthdays ten years ago. Was I right?" Maud: "I believe so. I know very well it was two years after you stopped."

An Averted Tragedy.

"THE first man that made a declaration of love to me said that if I did not marry him he would shoot himself before my eyes." "Good Heavens, the man was crazy. Why did you not have a watch put over him?" "I did. I married him."

How He Won Her.

"No," said the fair girl, "it's no use. You don't come up to my ideal." "Perhaps not," he answered. "But I don't care if I can only get anywhere near my own." "Your own?" she answered. "What is your ideal?" "You," he whispered.

Out of the Frying Pan.

MR. BLUNDER: "Why, your mother looks as young as you do, Miss Stale." "Miss Stale (stiffly): That is not very complimentary to me, Mr. Blunder." Mr. Blunder (confusedly): "I—I didn't mean that—I—I mean you look as young as your mother!"

Altered Matters a Little.

"I HEAR your engagement with Miss Boodle is off. How did it happen?" "In strict confidence, my friend, she got cross because I stole a kiss." "I don't see why that should provoke her—when you were engaged." "Well, you see, I stole this kiss from another girl."

Quite Successful.

"So Winnie gained her object, after all?" said Miss Vinaigrette to her friend. "No," was the reply; "he married someone else." "I know," said Miss Vinaigrette; "but he didn't marry Daisy. Winnie prevented that, which was all she wanted to do."

A Lifelong Sentence.

"I DON'T like to spoil your Christmas, dear," said the sweet little thing, "but I think we might as well consider our engagement as broken." "I don't see why. Your father said postponed." "Postponed until you arrive at years of discretion, and in your case, Reggy dear, you know what that means."

She was Flattered.

MRS. SANSOM: "I understand, sir, that you have secretly been making love to my daughter, and I must forbid an acquaintance begun in that way. You should have seen me first." Shrewd Suitor: "Madam, had I seen you first I should have forgotten your daughter and fallen in love with you." Mrs. Sansom: "Um—the informality of the proceeding was all I objected to. Come with me and I will introduce you."

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Concludes in this number.

A CRIMINAL MILLIONAIRE.

By GEORGE GRIFFITH.

Author of "The Angel of the Revolution," "Olga Romanoff," "The Lake of Gold," etc., etc.

THIRTY-SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Lion at Bay.

FOR the next forty days the guests on board the *Isola* enjoyed the pleasures of the unexpected almost in daily succession. Their idea, like the rest of the world which was wondering what had become of the vanished President and his yacht, was that he would take the shortest route to the entrance to his unknown Underworld.

But Isolo Staunton and his trusty adviser knew that this would be expected of them and therefore the exact opposite was done. No sooner was the *Isola* well out of sight of land than she altered her course to the south-south-east and ran in an almost direct line at her utmost speed, save when the sighting of a vessel, which her guests would have so dearly loved to speak, necessitated a change of course and slowing down.

Meanwhile they noticed that, day and night, men were slung over the sides on stages, working hard with paint brushes and pots.

When they came on deck on the fifth morning they found that one of the two big funnels had disappeared and that yards had been rigged on the fore-mast. The next day in the place of the after funnel there was a crossed-tree main-mast with the main and topmast shrouds and the rigging all taut and trim, and with mainyard, top-sail, and top-gallant yard, braces, and everything complete, already fitted.

"I feel bound to confess, my dear Smith," said Dennison, when he looked round at the constructive changes which had taken place during the night, "that our friend ought to have been born just about the end of the eighteenth century. He would have made quite a perfect pirate. Just look at this ship. At Nice and at Rio she was about the finest-looking yacht afloat. What is she now? A dirty grey-and-white, red-daubed hooker that no one would insure for a couple of thousand pounds, and fancy putting sails on her—sails on a boat that can do her forty knots, nearly. What is she now? A three-masted, one-funnelled, shabby-looking steamer, probably, as anyone who saw her would think, loaded up with hides from the Argentine, staggering somehow across the Atlantic."

"Yes," said Mr. Smith, looking round the dirty decks and at the tarnished brasswork which had once been so spick-and-span and brilliantly shining, "yes, I think I may say that I know something about disguise, but this disguise of a whole ship, so that her own builder wouldn't know her, this, my dear Dennison, proves, as I said to you yesterday afternoon, that we have to do with a genius, and if we only catch him, what a triumph."

"Good morning, gentlemen," sounded Staunton's voice from windward across the deck, "you see, we have been making a few alterations. I'm afraid we haven't improved her appearance very much, but, unhappily, it is sometimes necessary to put even beauty into disguise."

"And that," said Mr. Smith, "I think you have done this time very effectually. Would it be allowable to ask our latitude and longitude?"

"If you will come up on the bridge," said Staunton, "I think I can about tell you."

He went up and they followed him. He took a pair of prismatic binoculars out of a case in the wheel house, took a look through them to the eastward ahead, then giving them to Mr. Smith, he said, pointing to what looked like a little cloud lying on the surface of the water:

"There, the land that you see ahead is, to be quite exact, 49° 20′ S. and 69° 24′ E."

"In other words," replied Mr. Smith, passing the glasses to Dennison, "Kerguelen Island."

"Otherwise known," added Dennison, when he had taken his squint, "as Desolation Land."

"Yes," replied Staunton, "that is one of the names that was given to it, and from what I have heard about it, I should say that it would be rather a dismal sort of place for civilised people to spend the balance of their days in. I believe there is just about enough growing on the land to keep life going with the help of the fish that you catch in Christmas Harbour, but it is only natural to conclude that the average civilised man—and woman—would deteriorate very considerably after working out an existence of that kind for a year or two."

"Yes," said Mr. Smith, "I suppose they would. As you say, it would be only natural. I have read about the place in Ross' 'Voyage to the Southern Seas,' and, speaking quite impersonally, I should say it was a most undesirable place for winter residence. And, again, trespassing on your confidence, Mr. Staunton," he went on, picking up the glasses again, "I don't suppose that you would choose such an utterly inhospitable spot even under present circumstances for your winter quarters."

"Not for myself, Mr. Smith, by any means," replied Staunton, with a laugh, as he looked round into the barrel of a Mauser pistol which Mr. Smith had put just under his nose.

"It's good enough for you, swindler, thief, assassin, and worse, for I happen to know what you wanted to do with my wife and daughter——"

"Durtal, Durtal," shouted Staunton in French; "come here."

"What do you want, sir," cried the captain, flinging open the door of the chart room.

"That," said Dennison, sending a bullet through his brain.

"To the rescue!" shouted Staunton, turning round and seeing two of the Mauser pistols pointed at his eyes. "What, you my prisoners here on my own ship——"

"Drop it, Señor," said Mr. Smith, in a curious mixture of the London vernacular, as his left hand caught the wrist of the arm which was moving towards Staunton's hip pocket.

Staunton was a man who could have broken Mr. Smith across his knee, but when that terrible upward wrench came, he was as helpless as a child. A lurch of the vessel sent Durtal's body pitching and rolling down the ladder from the bridge to the deck. At the same moment Darfield swung one of the Maxims on the forecastle round so that it commanded the bridge.

Staunton looked at it for a moment and shrugged his shoulders.

"And now," said Mr. Smith, with his eyes staring straight into Staunton's and his finger on the trigger of his pistol, "you know as well as we do that if we were to take you and your yacht back to England there would be very little difficulty in getting her condemned as a smuggler of false coin and counterfeit notes, and I need hardly add that there would be still less difficulty in sending you to the scaffold after we had produced the evidence which we possess as to the real cause of certain murders—call them mysterious deaths, if you like—which happened in London shortly before the *Isola* made that

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mysterious trip from Leith to the Bay of Nice and somehow managed to sight the ice cap of Hekla *en route*."

"Don't worry about details, Mr. Smith," said Staunton, still looking at the muzzle of the Mauser. "Get to the facts, please."

"Just what I was going to do," replied the detective. "No, don't move, please. We have got everything arranged, and if you lift a finger Mr. Darfield will sweep the decks with that Maxim. What I was going to say was this: If Mr. Dennison and myself did our duty, we should either shoot you now or take you home to be hanged with your friend and accomplice Ramiero Valdez, otherwise Padre Ramiero, who was so very nearly caught over the West Indian business. But you have a daughter who loves this victim of yours, whom you thought to consign to a living death of slavery and degradation—a fate which I understand you had also reserved for my own wife and daughter—in this Underworld of yours. For her sake we are going to give you and Valdez the option of disappearance."

"In Desolation Land, I presume," laughed Staunton; "well, what's the alternative?"

"For the present, at least," replied Mr. Smith, "you have the choice between Desolation Land, from which you may one day return, as you did from the Chinchas, and the undiscovered country——"

"In other words, Mr. Staunton," said Dennison, "you can take your choice between going ashore at Christmas Harbour with your friend Valdez and making the best of it there, with, of course, an ample supply of your own provisions, or being taken to the nearest British port and given in charge as the common, though gifted, swindler that you are. For your daughter's sake we should recommend absolute disappearance. Of course, there is a third choice, but, for your daughter's sake and Ellerton's, it would be a pity for you to take that. It would not be nice for us to have to go home to England and let it be known that your daughter's father had been shot or hung as a pirate and a murderer."

"You are perfectly right, gentlemen," replied Staunton, with all the coolness of the gambler who has staked all and more than he has against the fall of the loaded dice of the Fates and lost, "and you may believe me or not, as you like, but I am honestly, genuinely grateful to you for sparing Mercedes from the shame that you might have brought upon her. For her sake, I accept your terms unconditionally. I will answer for Valdez. Take the ship and everything there is in it. Give us a boat and some stores and I will promise you, in Mercedes' name, and by the memory of her mother, all that I hold sacred in the world, that we shall never contradict any story you like to tell about us."

THIRTY-SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Back to Civilisation.

As nothing was heard of the vanished *Isola* for over three months after her disappearance, it was universally concluded that she must have been so badly injured during her escape from the Bay of Rio that she got out to sea only to founder. As a matter of fact, her disguise had been so complete that, although she had been sighted over and over again, none of the keen-eyed watchers had recognised her, and so she was able to reach the Anchorage without exciting any suspicions.

But when once the couplings had been made there still remained the greatest danger and difficulty to be overcome. The nearer they got to the moorings, the more distinctly the Marconi apparatus on board interpreted the signals from the Underworld, but, try as they would, they could get no response to their own, and, therefore, it was impossible to converse with Ellerton. It was plain that, although by some means he had managed to construct an apparatus capable of sending signals through earth and water, either the Hertzian rays could not penetrate to him, or he was not able to receive them.

True, there was the telephone running through one of the guiding cables, but, as Darfield, who was the only one on board who completely understood the working of the diving-chamber, explained—if Herarra was still in control of his submarine kingdom, and Ellerton had managed to transmit his signals without his knowledge, to make the descent would simply be to enter a trap from which there would be no escape. For Mr. Smith, Dennison and himself, capture would mean death in the Boiling Lake, and for Madame de Ronski and Paula hopeless slavery. On the other hand, it seemed incredible that Ellerton, alone and a captive, should have been able to overcome his jailers and gain control of his vast prison-house with its population of slaves.

It was at this juncture that Darfield proved his complete sincerity and devotion by offering to go down alone in the diving-chamber and find out the true state of affairs. No one knew better than he did the tremendous risk that he was running, but he stopped all discussion on the subject by saying quietly:

"I am the only man who could possibly do it, because only four knew the secret—Mr. Staunton, Valdez, the Captain, and myself. Granted that Herarra is still in command, if a stranger went down he would simply be taken and killed at once. On the other hand, I could make them believe that I am on ordinary business and bring Herarra and Vizard back with me to have an interview with the Señor, as we used to call him. In that case, of course, it will be perfectly easy to deal with them. If they didn't believe me it would be awkward, but I still might manage to have a talk with Mr. Ellerton and get back, though then we could never rescue him. Still, I am the only one who can do anything, and I should be utterly unworthy to go back to Janet if I didn't do it."

He had his way, and when he had once more very carefully explained the working of the diving-chamber and the signals to the engine-room for lowering and raising it, he took down the telephone, rang up, and as soon as the answering ring came back, he said:

"Are you there, Herarra?"

"Yes," came the reply after a few seconds. "What have you been doing away so long? We thought you had got yourselves wrecked. Is the Señor on board, and have you any more stuff? We are getting short."

"Yes," replied Darfield. "I am bringing you a load down immediately, so stand by and have everything ready."

"All right," came the reply.

Darfield hung up the telephone again, and said to the others:

"That's a good idea—I didn't think of that. He can't very well suspect anything if I take him a load of silver down."

He pulled a lever at the end of the wall opposite to the sloping passage. A steel panel slid back, disclosing another room about ten feet square, half filled with ingots of silver.

"There's plenty there," he continued. "Now, I'll ask you to lend me a hand and load some of this into the diving-chamber."

They set to work with a will, and in half an hour or so, they had loaded in five hundredweight of the ingots. Then Darfield once again described the working of the mechanism with the help of a diagram which he had drawn for them, and went into the chamber. They both shook hands heartily, and Mr. Smith said shortly, but not without feeling:

"You are a brave man, Mr. Darfield, and I hope you'll have all the luck that your courage deserves."

"I hope so," replied Darfield, "but, remember, that if you make one mistake with the machinery they will know instantly down there that something is wrong. If I'm not back in an hour you may as well cast loose and go home, for the Underworld will be closed for ever."

They drew the levers and when the steel door had slid into its place the signal to lower was sent to the engine-room, and three rings on the telephone down the cable. Two answering rings came back, and then there was nothing for it but to wait and see what the fateful hour should bring forth, whether, in short, the Underworld was to be discovered and Ellerton rescued, or whether his fate and that of Darfield were to be shrouded in everlasting mystery.

Three-quarters of the hour passed, and still no signal came.

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Mr. Smith and Dennison had stopped talking. The latter stood by the levers, and the former beside the signal-bell, each with a Mauser pistol in hand. The forty-five minutes grew to fifty, then to fifty-three.

"I'm afraid it's about all up!" said Mr. Smith, who had his watch in hand.

"I am not," said Dennison, in his matter-of-fact way. "It's quite possible that they're just having a quiet talk together. Darfield, naturally, wouldn't want to seem eager to hurry them."

"You seem to forget, my friend," said Mr. Smith, almost anxiously for him, "that Darfield told them that the Señor was here, and wanted to have a talk with them, and from what I have heard and remember of our late host, he was not a man who cared to be kept waiting. Ah, there it goes at last!"

Four loud rings on the telephone announced that the diving-chamber was ready to ascend. Mr. Smith at once sent the signal to the engine-room for it to be hauled up. Fifty seconds later another bell rang, announcing that the chamber was in its place. Dennison pulled the lever which drew the plate in the floor of the *Isola* back into its place, and Mr. Smith counted four minutes by his stop watch. Then he nodded to Dennison, who at once pulled the second lever. The water-tight door at the bottom of the passage slid back, and that of the diving-chamber was opened. As they stepped back out of sight they heard, to their intense relief, Darfield's voice saying:

"Welcome back to the Overworld; you will find the Señor waiting for you in the Council Chamber. After you, gentlemen."

Leon Herarra and his lieutenant André Vizard walked all-unsuspecting up the sloping passage, as they had done in the same circumstances many a time before. But as Herarra took his first step into the lighted chamber at the top he heard a voice, which he had heard before in a crisis of his career, saying quietly in Spanish:

"Hands up, Señor, or I fire!"

At the same moment, Dennison had gripped Vizard by the collar, and put the muzzle of his Mauser under his ear, saying in French:

"You surrender, Monsieur?"

And, of course, there was nothing for it but that or sudden death, and so one of the most absurdly simple and yet momentous captures in the history of crime was made.

As the readiest means of disposing of them for the present the two prisoners were ordered to go into the still open treasure-room, which they did in savage and wondering silence, then the panel was shut upon them, and they were left to discuss the miracle at their leisure.

Darfield then made a second trip to the Underworld, and in about half an hour returned with two other passengers, one of whom was certainly not less astonished, though decidedly better pleased than his last had been. It need hardly be added that this one was Wilfrid Ellerton. The other was Señora Herarra, who had ascended under the impression that the Lord of the Underworld had rewarded her faithful services, as he had done once or twice before, with an invitation to a yachting trip.

As soon as Darfield had made the introductions, they went up to the Council-chamber, and thence on deck. In the saloon the Señora was speedily and most disagreeably undeceived as to the true state of affairs by being handed over to the chief stewardess with orders that she should be taken to a state-room and locked in.

Certainly the most delightful meal that Ellerton had ever eaten in his life was the supper which followed his release, and perhaps never had so few people so much to tell each other. All that Ellerton learnt is already old news to the reader. So, too, are most of his experiences in the Underworld.

What his hosts, like the rest of the world, were naturally most eager to know, was the secret of those mysterious signals which at the eleventh hour had brought all Isolo Staunton's far-reaching and deeply-laid schemes to naught, and made his own release possible, and this was the explanation in his own words:

"To begin at the beginning," he said, "I began speculating on the source of the light that we have down yonder. It was not gas, I mean natural gas, or incandescent vapour, and it was not electricity, and, what is more, neither my late host, Herarra, nor anyone else in the place knew what it was.

"They have a laboratory, but the chemist is only a half-educated sort of fellow, with no idea of research, or, indeed, anything beyond the chemistry of metals. He told me, as the others did, that they found the substance there in large quantities, washed it well in leaden vessels with hydrochloric acid, and then found a residue which gave off light, such a light, indeed, that they had to wear dark spectacles when they worked with the stuff.

"Then they put a small quantity into their lamps, and the lamps went on burning, as one might say, for ever. Of course, I needn't tell you what the stuff was?"

"Not radium, surely!" exclaimed Dennison, almost dropping his glass.

"Yes," laughed Ellerton. "Radium, and tons of it, as they say. Really, it is almost too ludicrous to think of these people going to all the trouble of breaking the law of nations to coin false money, and make counterfeit notes, when they had literally uncounted wealth close at hand just for the getting. However, that's only the first part of the explanation. As I told you, they thought they had got me there for life, and so they didn't make any objections to my amusing myself as I pleased, in fact—Staunton had given orders that I was to have perfect liberty within the Underworld.

"Fortunately, I had kept my chemistry well up to date, and it wasn't very long before I began to see the possibility of sending what I may call real radiograms to the Overworld, as, of course, they pass through rock and water just as easily as air, and so I set to work and made an apparatus, which I needn't bother the ladies by describing now, because I hope you will see a lot of them at work before long.

"All you have to do with it is to work a switch, which cuts off the rays given out from a large mass of pure radium, so that you can make longs and shorts of them according to the ordinary Morse code.

"Of course, I had a tremendous lot of trouble in finding a combination of substances to make my machine of, so that it would concentrate the rays, and send them in one direction, but when I had succeeded, I hoped that the signals would be picked up by some vessel with the Marconi apparatus on board, so I proceeded to fire off my signals—and the rest you know."

After supper there was a discussion on ways and means. It was, of course, absolutely necessary that the way to the Underworld should be kept open, and Darfield was the only man who could do so. Wherefore, as the second and third officers were quite capable of navigating the *Isola* back to Leith, where, according to contract, the crew were to be quietly paid off, and allowed to disperse, with no questions asked, it was decided that he should go back and take charge of affairs below, until the yacht should return with a regularly engaged crew and officers, and purged of her criminal character.

At Paula's earnest intreaty, her mother consented to make a short trip with her to the wonderland which Ellerton had been describing. It was nearly two hours before they came back, and when they did they brought Brenda, Thyrza, and Myra with them.

"It is all very, very marvellous," said Paula, while the others were wondering at the strange, almost unearthly, beauty of the three daughters of the Underworld. "But it is not nearly good enough for these poor darlings to spend their lives in. They should be daughters of the sun, and the blue sky, not of a lamplit cavern world like that. Our world will be a heaven to them when their poor eyes get strong enough to see it. Fancy, father, they have never seen the sun, nor the sky, nor the moon, nor the stars, nor the sea, nor the green fields. What a glorious revelation our world will be to them!"

EPILOGUE.

IT would take many more pages than are now available to describe the effect that was produced upon the civilised world

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in general by the news of the disappearance of Isolo Staunton and the revelation of some at least of the mysteries of the Underworld to the inhabitants of the Overworld.

For Mercedes' sake it was given out that her father had been killed by a shell from one of his revolted warships during the escape of the *Isola* from Rio, and, as it was not worth anyone's while to contradict it, it remained as an accepted fact, and whatever became of Staunton and Valdez after their landing on the shores of Kerguelen Island, both of them kept their word and never gainsaid it. It might be possible that this fallen Crœsus of criminality may from some unknown and obscure position have watched, as none but he could watch, the splendours of his darling's future progress, but, if he did, he gave no signs—possibly being well contented to know that one at least of his aims, her happiness in life, had been amply, if indirectly, secured, even though the greatest of his own projects had failed.

Mr. Smith, of course, kept his word to Darfield, and the authorities respected it. After all, he was only an accused and not a condemned man, and so, under the circumstances, he was taken as acquitted, and, being the only man capable of discharging the duties of the post, he was for the time being constituted keeper and manager of the Underworld.

And then, when everything else was settled, when all the stores of illicit coin had been given up, when Mr. Battley had been forgiven on condition of superintending the breaking-up of his engines and the minting and note-printing machinery which they ran, and when the somewhat wonder-stricken delegates from the mints of Europe and America had satisfied themselves that the source of the flood of illicit coin which had deluged the money markets of the world was at last honestly dried up, then there rose the somewhat momentous question as to the ownership of this submarine El Dorado with all its countless treasures.

The Danish Government at once put forth a claim, based on the original documents which related its first discovery, and which Kesteven, who had retained them against any emergency of this sort, placed at the disposal of the committee of inquiry, saying: "You will find, gentlemen, that our way into the Underworld is about fifty miles to the south-east of the coast of Iceland. If the Danish Government can find the way by which those original inhabitants got into that cavern, and gradually groped their road, maybe generation after generation, to where we found them, we'll talk, but not till then. Our way in is outside all territorial waters, and, therefore, by the law of nations, it is a new country, and we've a right to it."

It is true that there were certain somewhat awkward questions asked as to any share that he might possibly have had in the use that was afterwards made of this submarine territory, but for the sake of Cora and the Grand Duke he lied quietly and consistently, and as there was no one of any consequence who had an interest in contradicting him, the upshot of the whole matter was that the splendid inheritance of the Underworld was divided between Mercedes and Cora.

Of this the almost immediate result was the formation of the Ellerton-Kesteven Radium Syndicate, under the presidency of Sir Wilfrid Ellerton, whose grief at his son's supposed death could only have been equalled by his delight, not only at his restoration to the liberty of the Overworld, but also at the genius, for it was nothing less, that had accomplished his release.

None better than he recognised the illimitable possibilities of the new source of power and light, and none knew better than his co-director, Derrick Kesteven, how to turn them to the best financial account.

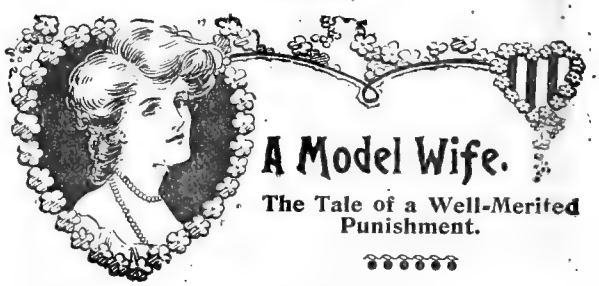
And while all this was being settled, a somewhat singular compact was being made among those who had not had a little to do with the solving of the mystery of the Underworld. Wilfrid and Mercedes had renewed the promise they had given each other behind the Council Chamber of the *Isola*, on the terrace of Señor Martinez's villa high up among the tree-clad, flower-scented mountains overlooking the moonlit bay of Funchal.

But it was impossible that their vows could be fulfilled until the year of mourning had passed, and so Cora and her Grand Duke, Lady Maud and her engineer, and Paula and her "detective," as she persisted in calling the man whose courage and devotion had won what many a man in Europe would have given a noble name and a coronet for, held a curious, but, for all that, intensely interesting, meeting in that same Council Chamber of the *Isola*—then lying spick and span in her own true guise and trim in Funchal Bay.

They also would wait for the fulfilment of their own happiness until Mercedes' sorrow should be turned by the magic of her strangely re-awakened love into joy, and then they would spend their collective honeymoon amidst the mysterious splendours of the Underworld, over which Darfield and Janet now reigned as king and queen.

And when in due course of time all this came to be accomplished, and they came back to the Overworld, they said, with well-justified agreement, that no such honeymoon had ever been spent in a world upon which no moon had ever shone.

The End.



A Model Wife.

The Tale of a Well-Merited Punishment.

Jones was well aware that his wife was in the habit of rifling his pockets when he was asleep, but, like a wise man, he kept silent on the subject. One night, however, he awoke and caught her in the act.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "what are you doing, my dear?"

The lady started, her cheeks flushed, the trousers dropped from her grasp, and she was about to make a full confession, when a bright idea entered her head. Recovering her composure, she said:

"I was looking to see whether your trousers needed any buttons."

"They do, they do, my dear," he exclaimed, springing out of bed; "needed them for weeks, months, and I wondered why you didn't sew them on; but I waited, for I was sure you would do it some time. And how kind of you to get out of bed at this time of night to attend to them. Say what you will, there's nothing in the world like a good wife. Let me turn up the gas while you sew them on. Got your needle and thread, and the buttons? No. Well, tell me where they are and I'll get them for you."

Mrs. Jones proceeded to sew on the buttons, while her husband sat on the side of the bed and encouraged her with words of praise for her wifely care and thought for his comfort, occasionally remarking that he would always say there was nothing in the world like a good wife.

Then he went to the wardrobe and brought out several pairs of trousers, a coat, two or three old vests, and a number of shirts, from all of which buttons were missing, and cheerfully observed:

"While we're at it we'll make a night of it."

Two hours later, when Mrs. Jones, with a weary sigh, removed the thimble from her finger, Mr. Jones patted her on the cheek and said:

"I say it again, my dear, I say it again, that wherever I go I will make it known, proclaim it from the house-tops, shout it in the highways and byways, that a wife who gets up in the night to sew buttons on her husband's clothes is a priceless treasure, a crown to that husband, and an ornament to her sex."

Then Mr. Jones, chuckling to himself, lay calmly down and slept the sleep of the just.

Tom Down.

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21/- **Fine Old Violin**, by Pietro Antorious; magnificent rich solo tone; in perfect condition, with fully mounted bow and case; approval.

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

The Lorn Colonial.

THE Colonial reader who painted such a doleful picture of his success with British maidens has the sympathy of "HONOUR BRIGHT," who writes: "I, for one, admire Colonials very much. They are more open and not so stand-offish as stay-at-homes. Your correspondent will find girls here more reserved than in the Colonies, but I am sure he will get on with them all right when he once gets to know them. He only wants a little patience."

* * * * *

I hope my Colonial friend will be encouraged by these kind remarks.

❦❦❦

Girl Who Doesn't Like Music.

"BERT" is very musical, and plays the violin and piano well, but his *fiancée* does not care at all for music, and never wants "BERT" to play. In fact, she is jealous of his being so fond of his fiddle, and thinks it makes him less fond of her. "BERT" wishes to know if this might not mean unhappiness in after years.

* * * * *

It is a great pity your intended does not share your love of music. It might mean unhappiness in after years, and it seems very foolish that she should be jealous of your accomplishment. I would not advise you, however, to worry about that, if you are fond of each other in other ways. Such a difference might arise, but only if the couple were not really attached to each other. Besides, surely you can educate her into liking your playing? There are very few girls so unmusical as to object to music in others, and I hope, for your sake, your *fiancée* is not one of those.

❦❦❦

Jealous of 'Bus Passengers!

SOME young men seem to have very jealous sweethearts, but I think "CLARIS" is unusually afraid of hers. She writes: "He was recently thrown out of work, and accepted a post as 'bus conductor. He sees a good many young ladies, and I have seen him deep in conversation with many of them. I have complained to him, but he said, 'I must speak to the passengers sometimes.' But I know he was a great flirt before I went with him. What is your advice?"

* * * * *

My advice is for you not to be so silly. Just fancy being afraid because your young man is civil and pleasant to his passengers. As for "deep conversation," well, conductors who have to explain to young ladies several times over that Charing Cross is not the Bank, and that every street isn't Holborn, have to be fairly "deep" or there would be trouble. Take my advice, and don't bother about your young man. He is evidently a very pleasant fellow, and none the worse because he shows it in his duties.

Unreturned Love.

"R. G." I am sorry you did not agree with my advice to "JACK" about meeting the girl who is so fond of him. But you know, I don't believe in "stock" advice, but try to enter into each case on its merits. In my opinion, "JACK" should agree to the girl's suggestion that they should meet. Because so far "JACK" does not return her love, is no reason at all why the two should cease to know each other, is it? It would be a very hard rule if all acquaintanceships had to cease because both were not in love from the first. You must know that love often takes time to mature. What may at first be mere friendship, deepens in time into something stronger. I quite agree that there is reason in your argument, but you know, the "correct thing" is not always the right thing, especially in love affairs.

❦❦❦

The Absent Husband Again.

"SINCE I became engaged last March," writes "BEATRICE," "my lover has learnt that he will be sent to South Africa about two months after our wedding this year. He will be away for about a year, and fears he will not be able to afford to take me as well. What do you advise? Should we postpone the wedding until he returns, or should we get married, and then part for such a long time? I will abide by your decision."

* * * * *

I think, if both of you are willing, it might be better to postpone the wedding. After all, it would be very hard on you to part so soon after for a year, and it would not be very nice for you after marriage not to have a home of your own. When he comes back, you would be able to settle down happily together.

❦❦❦

Tea and Etiquette.

Two girls know two young men. One of the latter lives in lodgings. Would it be incorrect for the girls to accept an invitation to tea at the man's rooms? This question comes from "VIOLET."

* * * * *

That depends on the sort of girl you are. There is nothing very terrible, to my mind, in two girls having tea at a young man's rooms. It is done a good deal in what are called Bohemian circles, and is not thought very much of. If you do not live in those circles, but have neighbours and friends who are easily shocked, then you should not accept such invitations unless accompanied by a chaperon. Under those circumstances, no polite young man would give the invitation unless he also included an older lady, say, your mother, or married sister, or maiden aunt.

❦❦❦

An Awkward Fix.

"H. R." lives near a business establishment where a lot of young ladies are employed. He often passes them on the way to business, and one of them, who had stared very hard for some time, has now started bowing to him as they pass. "H. R." does not know her, and does not particularly wish to, but how should he act when they meet in this way?

* * * * *

You should make up your mind, "H. R.," as to the reason for the girl's bowing to you. Perhaps she fancies she has met you, and wishes to resume the acquaintance. On the other hand, she may be doing what is called "throwing her cap" at you. If you don't really wish to know the girl you should avoid meeting her, and look in another direction when you pass. After noticing that her attentions are unwelcome I suppose she will not continue them. But if a girl bows to a man, and he notices it, his duty as a gentleman is to raise his hat.

Cynthia

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